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Vol. LXXVIII.

SILVER CITY SAM, THE HIGH-ROLLER DETECTIVE By JOS. E. BADGER, JR.



LEAPING INTO THE AIR, SILVER CITY SAM DASHED BOTH FEET, WITH STUNNING FORCE, AGAINST THAT BROAD BOSOM.

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LEAPING INTO THE AIR, SILVER CITY SAM DASHED BOTH FEET, WITH STUNNING FORCE, AGAINST THAT BROAD BOSOM.

Silver City Sam,

The High-Roller Detective;

OR,

The Death-Watch of Gopher Slope.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "SPARKLER SAM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE BRAND OF THE SABLE HAND.

"I SAY, pardner, maybe you can tell—Holy smoke!"

It was only an imperfect glimpse at first, but surely that was a human being resting against yonder gray bowlder; and what is a man's tongue for but to ask questions when in doubt?

So Samuel Sheldon reasoned, and beginning to feel an uncomfortable doubt as to whether or no his intended "short cut" would prove such, or turn out to be "the longest way around," he sent forth a cheery, good-natured hail, only to stop short after taking a couple more steps, breaking off with a sharp ejaculation.

For, instead of coming face to face with a fellow mortal, he was confronted by a gruesome corpse!

Only an imperfect view, as yet, but the ugly truth was past doubting.

A corpse, and that of a man who had died in bitter agony, or of mental torture.

Cool-brained, strong-hearted, steady-nerved though he surely was, Sheldon recoiled, hands dropping to his pistol belt as he flashed a swift, almost apprehensive look around.

Not a living soul was visible, nor did a sound break the silence which seemed natural in that lonely region.

Alone with the dead!

A brief-lived hesitation; then Sheldon moved around more nearly in front of the body, stopping short to view that now unpleasant spectacle.

For such it surely was!

What had once been a man of middle age, powerfully built, with long, muscular limbs, and a face which had been far from uncomely in life, but which now bore the impress of—Gods!

"It looks like Satan's grip!"

The dead man was half-seated upon, half-lying against, a gray mass of rock, just as though he had been overtaken by death while resting after arduous exercise.

Around his middle was still buckled a cartridge-studded belt of webbing, lending support to a sheath-knife and a brace of heavy revolvers.

Upon his head still rested a cowboy hat of pearl-gray felt and buckled band of clear leather, cocked over one ear in jaunty fashion; becoming enough in life, perhaps, but seeming grimly grotesque, just now.

His shirt of gray flannel had a gayly-embroidered front, but the smoked pearl buttons were misplaced, the flaps were turned back, giving a fair view of that broad, hairy bosom, over the center of which now distinctly showed a black right hand!

Just as though a man had dipped into a pot of dingy black paint or dye, then pressed it against the sensitive skin!

That brand was enough to awaken powerful curiosity, surely, yet Samuel Sheldon hardly gave it a passing glance; for his eyes caught sight of another brand, where those jetty fingers seemed to have fairly buried themselves in the flesh as they closed about that muscular throat.

Yes, the grip of Satan, for what mortal being could have made such a terrible brand as this?

"Choked to death!" muttered Sheldon, after a brief scrutiny, then casting another half-apprehensive look around the place as he added in barely audible tones: "May the good Lord have mercy on his soul!"

Again no sight, no sound to tell of other life in that vicinity; and with his natural curiosity rising still higher, Sheldon moved closer to that ghastly spectacle.

Now he could see that those sable brands were surrounded by a narrow edging of red, as though the flesh had been scorched

And then he saw something more!

Hidden until now by the long, loose locks of iron-gray hair, Sheldon saw the metal-bound haft of knife or of dagger, the blade of which was buried in flesh.

A strong and a sure hand dealt the blow, sinking the blade to its hilt at the junction of neck with shoulders, below the left ear.

At sight of the weapon, Sheldon stepped impulsively forward, one hand going out to grasp that hilt if only to investigate further; but ere he could do more, a sound caused him to make a half-turn, hand dropping to his own belt of arms as he caught sight of moving figures.

At least two armed men, one of whom called forth in gruff tones:

"Steady, thar, stranger! What sort of game are you up to, anyway?"

"Steady goes, and you don't want to waste your shells, either!" came swiftly from Sheldon's lips as a business-looking revolver slipped smoothly forth from its scabbard. "Flag of truce for choice, but if it must be shoot—"

"Keep your linen on, pardner!" cut in the other as he stepped in front of his more belligerent comrade, an empty hand showing as he added: "We're not hunting a row, just now, and if you can show clean hands—"

"And they want to be mighty sight cooler than those poor Jonah felt, too!"

With those words came a half-shrinking, half-vengeful glance toward the dead man, but hardly such a look as would have been given if this had been the first view of that sable brand.

So reasoned Sam Sheldon, and a touch of suspicion made itself felt in that fleeting second.

"You know him, then?"

"We did know him, yes!"

"Changed mighty nigh past knowing, though, now! Those black paws—here's hoping they don't fit your size, stranger?"

Sheldon flushed a bit at that poorly-veiled hint, but spoke up promptly:

"I've had no more to do with man or mark than you—if so much! I was on my way to Gopher Slope, afoot. I took what I was led to believe would pan out a short cut, and it brought me here. I caught sight of—Well, of that, hardly a minute since. I hadn't even touched hide or hair when you chipped in; and now if you mean to insinuate that I did this, you'll eat your words or chaw lead in a holy hurry!"

"Go easy, Jack! Don't mind Ellison, stranger, for his growl is mighty sight worse than his bite. And—Cain is really croaked, then?"

"If you mean this poor fellow, I should say so! Who was he, and what in time does this—ugh!—mean?"

Sheldon shivered as he called attention to those ugly brands, stepping a little aside as he spoke to give them a fairer view.

Surely this was not their first glimpse of the strangely-marked corpse? And yet, why pretend that it was?

The two men—both rather young and of ordinary appearance—slowly drew closer to that gruesome object, and to those watchful eyes they betrayed more curiosity than awe or grief.

A brief silence; then he who had been called Jack Ellison spoke, in low tones:

"Caught it right where he lived, eh, Esau?"

"You bet! Better have stood up to the trough and drawn his rations with the rest of them. Instead—this!"

"Shows that a fellow can't run clean away from his luck, Gray!"

"Not when his front name's Jonah, anyway, Jack!"

A short laugh followed this, sounding strangely out of place in such ghastly company and Sheldon could not refrain the query

"Who was this poor fellow, strangers? And, what about these ugly marks? Seems as though you'd either seen or heard of the like, before?"

The two men turned his way, gazing keenly, before making answer.

"Maybe you wouldn't mind setting a copy, sir? You're new to these parts, that's plain enough."

"Well, yes, far as that goes, though I'm hardly a tenderfoot. My name is Samuel

Sheldon, and I'm last from up-country. Some people call me Silver City Sam, for short."

"From Silver City, eh? And yet you never heard tell of anything like this?" with a quick gesture toward the branded corpse. "Never heard of the Skeleton Rider, or of the Death-watch of Gopher Slope?"

"What! You surely don't mean—I set all that down as guff for pilgrims from Greenville!"

"This don't look much that way, does it?"

"Surely not! And yet, it's mighty hard to believe any such wild yarn as that of a living skeleton of fire, and—what cause had this poor fellow given for such a horrible punishment, though?"

"Nothing worse than to shinny on the wrong side. A right good man as the word goes, too! Eh, Jack?"

"You bet ye! His own Jonah, though. And to think we laughed at the poor fellow when he said he'd gone to his own funeral three nights in succession! Something in it, eh, Esau?"

"Begins to look sort o' that way, for an ugly fact!"

The two men stood gazing upon the branded body with half-listless curiosity expressed in face and attitude, while Sheldon covertly studied them both.

His earlier suspicions were dying away, now, and he could comprehend why they should betray so little amazement at that ghastly discovery.

If all wild tales were true, this was not the first victim of red knife, and sable right hand!

As though satisfied that Jonah Cain was past all mortal aid, the two men drew aside, willingly accompanied by the man from Silver City; and Esau Gray took it upon himself to more frankly answer the questions asked by Sam Sheldon.

"He tried all he knew how to cheat death, poor Jonah! He threw up a paying job and racked out in the dark, last night, thinking to foolish the Death-watch; but, this is the way she panned out!"

"You think he had warning of what was to come, then?"

"Sure! Had it for weeks and months past; just such warning as every man connected with the Coupon Mine on Hindoo Hill has been given, time without end! But, 'twas only of late that Jonah began to lose his nerve, and after that—well, it's the beginning of the end with a fellow of his caliber."

"Then this demon—the Death-watch, as you term it—doesn't deal his blows at random?"

"Which?"

"He acts on a regular system, and only attacks those interested in a certain bit of property?"

The two pards interchanged swift glances, then Esau Gray answered:

"Something of that sort, yes. Cain was superintendent of the Coupon, under Absalom Nesbitt. Getting double pay on account of the risk and extra responsibility, but—well, right here you see how the whole thing panned out!"

Three pair of eyes turned toward the silent shape which added such a spice of morbid interest to the grim tale, being hinted at rather than told, and neither one of the trio caught sight or sound of the approaching peril until it was too late to avert or meet it fairly.

Stooping low and silently stealing along between yonder gray masses of stone and scattered bits of dingy shrubbery, came several armed prowlers.

Nearer still, until they could wholly command the unsuspecting trio, then came the harsh command:

"Throw up your hands, all, or we'll blow ye through!"

CHAPTER II.

SILVER CITY SAM PLAYS A TRUMP.

No surprise could have been more complete than this, and the trio whirled about only to find themselves covered by a half-dozen cocked revolvers, gripped in brown hands of half as many determined-looking men.

"Steady, all of ye!" harshly added the spokesman, his strong face looking especially forbidding, as it showed in part above that

polished tube of death. "Make a kick, and it'll be your last one this side of glory!"

"Don't shoot, Castle!" quickly exclaimed Esau Gray, at the same time lifting his empty hands in compliance with that stern command. "You know we're not—"

"Hands up and steady, all!" was the almost savage rejoinder. "Riddle 'em, boys, if they even bat an eye crooked!"

"If you reckon we hurt Jonah—"

"Button up, Jack Ellison! We're not thinking, so much as knowing, just now, and without— Steady, now, I tell you!"

Though taken so completely by surprise, the man from Silver City showed himself fairly sensible, since his hands went aloft in prompt obedience to that command, leaving reason or argument to follow later on when a better opening was afforded.

And yet it was only man to man, but the odds were wholly with the latest comers.

Each had picked his man before taking decided action, and now at least two of their number had eyes for only those, leaving the burly leader to do the talking for all.

His guns were covering Silver City Sam, and his face looked more like shooting than soothing, just then.

"All right, and hands are up," Sheldon said, placably, as he suited action to words. "And now—touch lightly on that trigger, my dear fellow!"

"I'll touch it heavy enough to send you kiting over the range, my pretty bantam, unless you walk mighty straight!"

"I wouldn't mind taking a bit of a walk, far as that goes," half-humorously returned the Silver City representative. "But, how can a fellow walk when you've got him nailed so mighty tight, pardner?"

"Well, you tote your lip with you, anyway!"

"Why wouldn't I, then? Isn't this a free country? And I'm both white and free-born, if I do sing the tune myself! So—eh?"

"I'll make you sing out of the other side of your mouth, first thing! Keep those hands up, I say, or I'll lay you out too cold for skinning!"

"Give me a yeast-cake if you want 'em any higher, Top-lofty!" a bit snappishly came the retort; but, rather than provoke a shot which he saw no chance of either avoiding or returning in kind, Sheldon stretched his arms an inch or two higher.

Meanwhile Gray and Ellison were rallying from their disagreeable surprise, and at that break, the first named called forth with well-simulated eagerness:

"You, is it, mates? We've found him—right yonder!"

He made a partial gesture in the direction of the branded corpse, but a harsh warning cut both speech and motion short.

"Go easy, there! Hold 'em steady, or I'll lay you out for an early breakfast, Esau!"

"Oh, come, now! This isn't half fair, boys!"

"Try to kick too hard and we'll make it whole fare, and I'll punch your ticket for Kingdom Come!" grimly warned his particular adversary. "This is business, Esau!"

"You're mighty righty she am!" confirmed the last one of the surprising trio. "Chaw on that, Jack Ellison, and don't swallow the warning in lump, neither!"

"What have we done to deserve such treatment as this?" indignantly persisted Gray, his face angrily flushed, his temper dangerously heated, yet forced to stand in harmless attitude before those armed hands.

"Well, that's what we're going to find out. If poor Jonah could do the talking, maybe we wouldn't need any further evidence, though!"

This was an ugly insinuation, and Gray paled a bit at first. He even seemed to shrink back as though from a menacing blow; but only for a second or two.

"Don't you say that, Dick Lane! Don't you even dare to insinuate that we had aught to do with Cain's death!"

"If I do say it, reckon I know how to back up my words, Esau Gray!"

"Easy; don't rub it in too thick, gentlemen!" sharply yet placably interposed the man from Silver City as he realized how critical matters were growing. "Muzzle that bulldog of yours, pardner, can't you?"

These words were directed toward Perry

Castle, since he apparently acted as "boss" of the triangle for that occasion.

"Keep your linen on, stranger," he surlily growled, then adding to his own comrade: "Steady, Dick! Don't bite unless you just have to; but then make your teeth meet through all!"

"That's what I will, matey!"

By this time Silver City Sam was beginning to wax hot and his blood to leap more rapidly than usual through his veins.

Peace was all well enough in moderation, but there was such a thing as carrying submission to force entirely too far.

Conscious of having committed no wrong, it irked him severely to put up with treatment like this, and there was a touch of anger in his voice as he spoke again:

"You can't say we haven't acted clean white, so far, Mr. Castle, if that's your right name."

"Don't let my name worry you, stranger!"

"Nor its owner, either. And so—what have we done to merit such treatment as this, pray let me ask?"

Castle gave a swift motion of his head toward the near-by corpse before replying in words:

"What does that mean, then?"

"That poor devil has come by his death through unusual means," was the grave response, "but if you mean to insinuate that I had aught to do with that death, you—lie like a cur!"

That break was barely long enough to lend particular emphasis to the words which followed: spoken coldly, evenly, but with dauntless courage and matchless nerve, considering how terribly the odds were against the Silver City representative.

A hot flush shot into that bronzed countenance, but Perry Castle did not pull trigger, although Sheldon more than half anticipated a shot in response.

"I'd lift your roof for that if you stood with a gun in your fist, stranger," slowly declared the Gopher Slope citizen.

"That excuse needn't stand in the way," quickly retorted Silver City Sam, his blue eyes catching a glitter as of sunshine on polished steel. "I've got both gun and fist—"

"And you'll have a leak in your roof, if you don't go slow," curtly cut in the burly citizen. "Jonah Cain has been murdered like a sheep-killing cur, and somebody's got to pay for that; pay big, too!"

"Oh, come, now, Castle!" impatiently cried Esau Gray, rallying once more.

"Joking's all right in its place, but this is carrying a jest entirely too far!"

"A joke, eh? Well," with a grim curling of his heavily mustached lip, "it's a joke that'll kill quicker'n scat if you so much as try to kick against it, Esau!"

"You're mighty right, thar, too!" gruffly spoke up the third member of the surprising squad. "Who fixed up pore Jonah like that, eh?"

"Who? Why, the Death-watch, of course!" almost mechanically answered Gray with a fleeting glance toward the dead man against the rocks.

"And who's the Death-watch?" bluntly demanded Perry Castle.

"Surely not us!" interposed the Silver City delegate, taking his turn. "You surely can't think that way, gentlemen?"

"Why wouldn't we, then?" retorted Castle, still keeping his left hand at a level with cocked revolver, though he replaced its mate in scabbard at hip in order to use his right hand for pulling a plug of tobacco from his pocket. "Somebody surely plays the Death-watch, and we stumble on you fellows right here with poor Cain—branded all to a blister!"

A curious catch in his breath caused that brief break, and his eyes flashed swiftly from side to side like one more than half expecting a far from pleasant vision to break upon their field.

Silver City Sam felt sure of one thing: this burly fellow had been a firm friend to yonder dead man while in life.

"Why wouldn't you, is it?" he demanded, quickly. "Because that'd be a fool's idea, and you don't look that way, exactly. Why, man, dear, I'll prove that we're not the Death-watch, or lose my good money!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just this much: I've got a bet up that

I can break this Death-watch hoodoo, and show up the Skeletonspook in its true colors. That's what brought me to this part of the country, and now I've seen a fair sample of the devil's work, I'm more than ever eager to tackle the job in downright earnest!"

Sheldon spoke like one in thorough earnest, but a sneer showed upon the bronzed face of his adversary, and an insult lurked in that drawl:

"I'm something of a liar myself!"

Possibly the ending might have been just the same, but that sneer certainly hastened matters, for, as Perry Castle relaxed his vigilance in a certain degree, he met with the surprise of his life.

Knowing that any attempt to lower his hands to grasp a weapon would surely warn the burly fellow, Silver City Sam took other action. Leaping into the air and dashing both feet with stunning force against that broad bosom, sending Castle reeling backward, knocked fairly out of time, and all so suddenly that the fellow had no chance to make use of the deadly weapon he still gripped in his left hand.

Quick as a cat the Silver City Sport alighted safely, then whirled and leaped upon the other members of the party before they could fairly realize that aught had gone wrong!

With a hand to each collar he jerked them backward, kicking feet from under them, dropping both men with stunning force upon the stones, at the same time crying out sharply:

"Pull their teeth before they can bite, pardns! Disarm and bind 'em in a holy hurry, now!"

He set the good example himself, looking after Perry Castle in person, twisting the revolver out of those partially unnerved fingers, then slipping the buckle which held that belt of arms, tossing all aside for the time being.

"Go easy, there, mates!" came his stern warning as he saw signs that hinted at unnecessarily rough usage beyond. "We're not in the butchering business, remember!"

"Confound 'em for dirty whelps!" viciously growled Esau Gray. "Only for you they'd be twisting hemp for our throats; now we'll play even or know the reason why!"

"Don't you make me show you the reason why, gentlemen!" still more sternly warned the Silver City delegate. "Disarm and bind, but if you go beyond that—better not!"

No very ferocious threat, surely, yet it seemed quite sufficient for his purpose.

After that recent exhibition Silver City Sam found no difficulty in making his voice heard or his wishes understood.

Willing hands make swift work, and before the surprised surprisers could rally from their fall, they were put past the power of harming others; their weapons removed, their arms securely bound behind their backs, while Samuel coolly addressed bewildered Castle with the query:

"Well, old fellow, how do you like it far as you've got, anyway?"

CHAPTER III.

THE HIGH-ROLLER DETECTIVE'S PLATFORM.

"I'll be upsides with you for this, if it takes a hind-leg off!"

"Nothing like chewing the rag, is there? Shall I hoist you up on end far enough to make your kicking count, gentle saint? Your foresight was bad enough, pardner, but your hind-sight— Go 'way grief!"

Silver City Sam felt in the humor for chaffing, a bit, but, curiously enough, neither Perry Castle nor either of his comrades in bonds appeared to appreciate his playful wit.

The big fellow gave a sound which was at least half a curse, and wrestled with his bonds after a fierce fashion; but 'twas all labor spent in vain, and merely served as food for amusement on the other side.

Sheldon stood by with carelessly folded arms, smiling at those futile efforts, speaking only when Castle had given over the attempt to gain his liberty.

"No use, eh? I could have told you as much at the jump-off, and so spared the wear and tear on your feelings, pardner.

Why dear boy, I filled my copybook with that very motto, fast bind, fast find!"

"I'll find you, right where you live, too!"

"Right where I'll keep on living, then. That's pretty much what's the matter with you now; you've found me just once too often," asserted the Silver City delegate, his voice turning stern as he added:

"You tried to play the bully, and only proved yourself an ass. You thought to win a little cheap credit by jumping a stranger from behind, but, what have you made by it?"

"If you didn't have a hand in wiping out Jonah Cain, why kick?"

"Why not kick when a John Donkey set us such a pattern?" retorted Gray, plainly enjoying this phase of the situation far more completely than he had the opening chorus. "Would you have us wait until up a tree before to kick, Castle?"

"Well, if you could prove you didn't—"

"What chance did you give us to prove that or anything else?" Silver City Sam asked, sternly. "When we opened mouth, you gave us the muzzle of a gun to chew on. Now, you do the listening while I sing, please!"

"If you'd acted even half-way white, you fellows wouldn't be in this pretty little hobble."

"We'd done nothing to merit such usage, and no person knows that better than you do."

"Wasn't you here, 'longside him?"

"Certainly; and our being here, without trying to hide either it or ourselves, is ample proof that we had no part or lot in his taking off. Any fool could tell you that much, Castle, but that's right where the shoe rubs on your corns!"

"You seem to be a pretty decent sort of fellow, for the class you race in, Perry; but, there was one thing omitted at your first coming into this world; you were born without good sense, and you've been growing no better ever since!"

"I'll pay you off for all this, curse you!"

"Curse not, lest thou be overrun with a mighty foul breed of chickens, Perry Castle! As you seem fond of advising your betters: keep your linen on, my pretty fellow!"

"If I ever—"

"Of course you will; but, what of it? Just now you can't, while I can, and so—see the point, do you?"

Silver City Sam gave a chuckle as the discomfited bully writhed in his bonds; but he had a definite point in view, and wasted little more time in getting at it.

"I told you the naked truth, although you didn't see fit to take it in for gospel, gentlemen," he added, addressing all in place of merely the leader.

"My name is Samuel Sheldon, better known, perhaps, as Silver City Sam, from my more recent stamping-grounds."

"For lack of a more paying business I've been acting as a detective, but finding myself out of a job, and hearing no little concerning the lawless doings of your Skeleton Road agent, your Death-watch, your Black Hand and Bloody Knife outfit, I had about made up my mind to take a ramble down in this direction just to see what grain of truth might be sifted out of the mountain of chaff, when a certain gentleman whose name needn't worry you, just now, offered a bet that decided me to take a flyer, anyway."

"Right there you have my pedigree, gentlemen, as far as it can possibly concern yourselves, and put a mighty sight clearer than I'd ever given it, so long as you held the drop."

"Now, one or two words further:

"I'm going on to Gopher Slope, and I'm going there as Silver City Sam, the High-roller. Those who don't savor my style can do the other thing, and if you're still in the humor for fault-finding, when you get back to town, stick up your sign and let it be known of all men that you have business with a fellow of my dimensions."

"I'll find you unless—"

"You surely will if you really wish to find me, but you want to improve the drop better than you have the one you stole out here."

"Give me half a show now, and we needn't wait for getting back to town, curse you!"

"In a dreadful rush, aren't you? Like to oblige such a pleasant-spoken tramp, but,

really, now, I couldn't think of cutting short your lesson in good manners!"

"We're going on to Gopher Slope, and I hope to meet you there, one and all. If you really think I owe you aught, after taking the trip with your hands past getting into fresh mischief, I promise to pay the score in coin of your own election."

"If you manage to pick up a glimmer of common sense on the way, as I really hope you may, and are willing to call it square, you'll find in waiting the hand of a white man both ready and willing to meet you on the dead level."

"Now, let your legs do double duty, since your hands and arms are out of the game for a bit. Here's your tools: make a better use of them in the time to come, or one of these long come-shortlies you'll buck up against the wrong man, and get everlastingly salivated: yes, you just will, now!"

While speaking thus, Silver City Sam replaced the belt of arms about Castle's waist, securing it snugly in place, then serving the other men after a similar fashion.

Gray and Ellison frowned at this, and seemed to think the fellows were getting off entirely too easy, but Sheldon paid them no attention, drawing back only when his work was done to his liking.

"You can begin to lift foot whenever the humor strikes you, gentlemen," was his addition as he drew back, dusting his hands lightly. "Hope you'll make the run on schedule time, without accident or break down. And if you should chance to run up against this Skeleton, Ghost, Death-watch, or Devil's Emissary, pray give him my compliments and tell him to get ready for the judgment-day!"

Turning away, without waiting for retort, Silver City Sam slipped a hand through an arm of each of his newly-made friends, leaving the branded corpse and the bound men to their rear.

At first both Gray and Ellison seemed loth to leave, but both quickly yielded to that master-will, and by the time they lost sight of the quartette, all ill-humor seemed blotted out by boisterous mirth.

They laughed heartily over the utter discomfiture of Castle and his fellows, congratulating the man from Silver City on his adroit turning of the tables.

"A neater bit of work I never saw!" declared Esau, enthusiastically. "And now—holy smoke! If Castle has to mosey all the way to the Slope with his fins hobbled—if he has to get help from some of the cits—glorious Moses!"

"He'll swell up and bu'st with pure shame!"

"Or break his fool neck trying to get at you to play even, stranger!" amended Esau. "Of course you were stuffing him about being—er—all that, eh?"

"You think I was lying to him, then?"

"Oh, I don't know as I'd call it just lying, but, even if you did, what matter? What call had he to know anything at all about your business, anyway?"

"None at all, if I hadn't seen fit to give him the information of my own free will," quietly returned Sheldon, letting his hands slip away from their arms as they came to a trifle more difficult ground.

"That's what I said; and I don't blame you for foolishing the fellow, for—"

"But I told him the naked truth," interrupted the Silver City delegate. "My name is Sheldon; I'm last from Silver City, and I follow the trade of detective."

"Do you really mean all that, man?"

"Or I surely wouldn't say it. Why not? Don't you need some one of that sort to straighten matters out in this section? And I'm going to get at the bottom facts of this Death-watch business, or lose the number of my mess while trying."

For a minute or two after this bold declaration, silence reigned.

Both Gray and Ellison seemed afraid even to talk of the Death-watch, or to give any additional particulars, such as might be of interest to a detective seeking to solve the dread mystery; but, after a while Esau spoke out more plainly:

"Of course I'm trying to wish you all good luck, Sheldon, but I'd rather 'twas you than me! It's dollars to doughnuts you'll feel the red hot hand if you tackle the job!"

Silver City Sam laughed lightly as he press-

ed ahead in the growing dusk, plainly feeling no superstitious thrills such as apparently troubled both of his present companions.

Just there the broken ground made far from easy or smooth traveling, but the end of that journey came far sooner than Sheldon expected.

The weight of a mountain seemed to fall upon his head without warning, and he sunk to the ground like one smitten by death!

CHAPTER IV.

AN UGLY BUSINESS.

THE heavy hand of Esau Gray dealt the blow before which Silver City Sam fell insensible!

For several minutes the two pards had been preparing for just such an ending of that tramp through the dusk, their covert glances and significant signs being covered by the increasing gloom.

The trick was all the more easily turned because its victim had not the faintest suspicion of the truth; as why should he?

Less than an hour earlier he had, unassisted, set the knaves free from a humiliating if not actually dangerous captivity.

So far they were deeply in his debt, and while he hardly mistook either for an unfledged angel, Sheldon certainly never dreamed of their committing such an act of shameless treachery as this.

Swift and sure Esau Gray struck, his clubbed revolver crashing down upon that unguarded head, felling the High-roller Detective like one smitten by the hand of grim death.

As he fell, Silver City Sam was covered by that active shape, those sinewy hands gripping his throat tightly to guard against a possible outcry.

But the precaution was useless. A convulsive shiver ran through that compact frame; the detective was past the power of fighting for his remnant of life, just then.

"Don't let him yelp, pardner!" excitedly cried Ellison, at the same time flashing a keen look around on all sides. "If Castle or the boys should have dogged us—"

"Don't you believe I will, boy!" muttered Gray, kneeling upon his victim, one hand maintaining its vicious grip, while its mate came back to the knife at his hip. "I'll soon put him past bleating; never you worry, now!"

The ugly-looking weapon flashed forth to rise with deadly intent; but, ere it could fall again, Ellison gripped tight that wrist, and hurriedly spoke:

"Hold on, pard! No cutting, man!"

"I'll sink such a shaft through his fool heart as will—"

"As will twist a rope for both our necks, you hot-head!" harshly interrupted Ellison, just then by far the cooler-witted of the twain. "Put up the sticker, pard, or I'll lend you a bat 'longside the cabeza for keeps!"

"Didn't you say to silence him?"

"Of course, but did I say to advertise it to all the Slope?"

"Who'll be any the wiser after the wolves have had their fill?"

"What's the matter with Perry Castle and his pards?"

Gray gave a surly growl at this, drawing back from the throat of his senseless victim, but still fingering his steel, thirstily.

"How'll they find out more than they know already?"

"Give me half a chance, and I'll make you see it with my eyes, Esau. Is he knocked out of time?"

"Didn't I hit him?"

"Of course; but such fellows sometimes tote a mighty thick head on their shoulders, and I'm not taking any chances, now."

"There wouldn't be even the ghost of a chance by this time, if you hadn't caught my hand, blame you!"

Ellison bent lower over the luckless detective, satisfying himself that Silver City Sam was indeed insensible to all that was going on; and not until then did he see fit to more clearly explain himself.

"Of course I said yes when your eyes asked me about dumping the fool," he said, picking up the thread where it had dropped. "It isn't his sort that we want blundering about these digging just now."

"And that's why I meant to put him past wandering, unless as a ghost. He'd make a nice running-mate for the Skeleton, now wouldn't he?"

"Touch lightly on that, pardner! As for this fellow, shut off his wind as quickly as you like, but don't advertise to all the world out part in the little job."

"You mean?"

"Well, Castle and his mates saw us leave in company, didn't they?"

"Of course. But—"

"Wait. Don't you reckon Castle will look for this duck, at the Slope, to play even for his upset, back yonder?"

"Well, he'll hardly find him there, I'm thinking!"

"You're not thinking, and that's just what's the matter with Esau!" bluntly declared the other. "If you'd stop to think, you'd never even dream of writing your signature with a knife, that way! If any person asks for the fellow, of course we don't know, since he gave us the shake just after leaving Castle; and when he's found—for Castle will hunt the country with a fine-tooth comb but that he'll find his game—why, an accident!"

"You're right, pardner!" frankly admitted Gray, putting up his knife with blade unstained. "An accident goes! And, of just what sort?"

"That's dead easy. Fell down an old shaft, of course!"

"Kicked there by the Death-watch, maybe, because of his making such hefty brags!" supplemented Esau, with a malicious chuckle.

First making sure that the detective was still insensible and unable to help himself, the two knaves made a brief scout, to guard against the bare possibility of being watched in their infamous actions by bound men; then they returned to pick up Sheldon between them, hurrying him away through the night, now fairly descended over the near-by mountains.

Five minutes of this conveyance seemed sufficient for their purpose; then Gray took full charge of the limp shape, supporting it upon his shoulder while moving along, leaving Ellison to keep a wary watch on all sides.

It was murder most foul they had in contemplation, and rough, wild, even lawless though that section was, both knew well enough what swift and sure punishment would be meted them for such a crime, if it was discovered.

Presently both men came to another halt, and as Gray lowered his burden to earth, he spoke in slightly-panting tones:

"As well here as anywhere, don't you reckon, Jack?"

"I reckon, yes. Pick your way, and don't leave any more marks than you just have to, although it's odds the rain will wash away every such sign long before morning."

"All right. I'll do the dumping act. You keep off, as there'll only be one set of tracks if it don't rain. His, of course, as he walked into the shaft in the dark!"

With a low chuckle the heartless knave again lifted his burden, moving cautiously forward for a few rods, then coming to a halt at the mouth of a deserted shaft.

With one last look around, Gray let Sheldon fall, leaning over the edge of that gloomy opening until he heard the body strike, far below the surface, apparently.

That done, he carefully picked his way back, stepping only on such stones and spots of bare, hard-baked dirt as he could see by the glimpses of light furnished by the full moon now sailing along through broken masses of stormy clouds.

Thoroughly content with their atrocious deed, the pair of plausible rascals hurried away from that section of the hills, plainly well acquainted with their surroundings, since they showed no doubt, no hesitation as to which turn or bend to make.

All was now darkness complete as the storm-clouds thickened overhead, yet they were both seen and saw, it appeared, shortly.

A low signal came from out the gloom. Instant reply was made, and Esau muttered to his comrade:

"The Boss, for rocks! Wonder what he'll think when he knows what we've been doing?"

"Say it's good leather, of course; why wouldn't he?"

"You tell! But he's so durned cranky at times, that— Here, sir!"

"It's worse than a stack of black cats down cellar!" came a deep-pitched voice, the owner of which came up an instant later. "I thought 'twas you, lads, and so— What luck?"

"Big luck! Jonah's croaked, Boss!"

"What?"

"That's what, for a solid fact, sir! We just stumbled across what's left of him, by pure accident; didn't we, Jack?"

"For sure we did!"

"And there it was: on breast and on throat, too! And eyes fairly popping out of his head! Ugh! If I'd been born nervous, reckon I'd own a bucking night-hoss for a solid month to come!"

"There it was?" echoed the Boss. "There what was?"

"The black hand, no less! Jonah thought to skip the country and so get off without paying penalty; but— Well, he met up with the Death-watch, all the same!"

"That's what he did, now!"

A low, soft chuckle followed that grim announcement, and he who was termed "Boss" spoke in careless accents:

"Well, that much is taken off our hands, then. Jonah is worth heap sight more to us dead than living; so, peace to his ashes! And the fellows out hunting for Cain? Didn't you stumble across any of them?"

By way of answer, Esau gave a tolerably accurate account of their adventure with the party from Gopher Slope, though giving Silver City Sam hardly as much credit for that neat turning of the tables as the High-roller Detective deserved.

The Boss showed a stronger interest in the stranger than in aught else, and in response to his questions concerning the detective, and what had become of him, Gray added the telling of the latter act of violence.

"Of course we didn't want him snooping around just now, sir, and so we just watched our chance and squelched him."

"You what?"

"Put him to sleep for keeps!"

Instead of the warm praises which Gray evidently expected from his chief, he was fairly overwhelmed by a flood of denunciation, the Boss seeming fairly beside himself, for the time being.

"Just now, indeed! Just now, when we need all the cover we can find to work under! Just now, when Absalom Nesbitt is all eyes and ears and the keenest of wits. Oh, you fools!"

Not until then could either of the lesser knaves slip in a word of self-defense, but as their master broke off to grind forth another grist of imprecations, Jack Ellison thrust in his oar, hastily explaining the light in which he viewed the matter.

First making it clear that Sheldon was a detective, he told how he had been disposed of, leaving no signs behind which could betray their agency, then adding:

"When we both swear he gave us the dirty shake before the accident happened, who can say we lie? And, didn't he act as our friend when he gave Perry Castle the grand dump?"

"That puts it in a different light, for a fact, and I reckon I did my kicking a bit prematurely," admitted the Boss, adding:

"Well, what's done can't very well be undone, and so we'll make the best of it. Keep your own counsel, and don't talk the matter over even between yourselves."

"Now, best make your way back to the Slope, and bunk in there, after letting a few solid citizens get a glimpse of your sweet mugs."

"Any particular reason, sir?"

"Well, we'll act as though there was, at any rate. For one thing, I have a notion the Skeleton Rider means to be abroad to-night; and if so, it'll be just as well to have a clean record to show the curious. Understand?"

"You bet we do, Boss!"

"All right, then. Pull-foot, and play it down to a fine point."

With that the speaker moved off through the darkness, and the two pards resumed their progress toward the mining-town of Gopher Slope.

CHAPTER V.

THE SKELETON ROAD-AGENT.

REMOVING his silk hat, Absalom Nesbitt pushed his nearly bald head out of the lowered window, calling out sharply:

"Give them a touch of the silk, Johnny! We're almost an hour behind the schedule as it is!"

"All right, boss; the silk goes. Git thar, daisies!"

At crack of whip the double span of mules quickened their pace as they breasted that long slope in the dusk, and the mining-magnate of Gopher Slope resumed his position inside "the hearse."

"Beg pardon, ma'am," with a half-bow toward the one lady passenger on that trip, "but I've got my reasons for wishing to keep as near the schedule time as possible, this trip."

"Is it very much further to town, then, sir?" asked a musical voice from behind the gray veil.

"Further than it should be at this hour," with a touch of acerbity which, to do him justice, Absalom Nesbitt rarely displayed while in the presence of a representative of the fair sex. "Only for the harness giving way—but maybe we'll make it, even yet!"

"Surely there can be no doubt as to our safe arrival, sir?"

"No, no; that isn't just it, ma'am," interposed another of the passengers. "We're bound to hit the Slope all right, only—"

"Let me make it clear, Constant," spoke up the speculator in mining property. "You see, Miss—"

"White."

"Thanks. You see, Miss White, it's something like this: For nearly a year past this section has been cursed by an infamous thief and road agent who rigs himself up to frighten weak-nerved fools of—"

"Touch lightly, thar, Nesbitt," interrupted Constant. "As good men as you be hev took skeer at the Skeleton Rider afore this, and here's hoping your little trap will slip up: not that I'm dead in love with that red-hot critter, but because I'm thinkin' heap sight more of my own good!"

"The Skeleton Rider!" echoed Miss White, with a nervous little movement. "What a strange title!"

"It's a mighty sight stranger critter as totes the title, ma'am," gravely asserted the veteran miner, with an ominous shake of his frosty pow as he took a glance through the window on his side of the coach. "I won't go quite that far my own self, but—waal, thar is them as swear he's plum' the Old Boy himself!"

"Only the fools I spoke of, a bit ago," interposed Nesbitt, with an impatient gesture of his plump hand, and a frown wrinkling his brows. "It's a man, easily enough, not the devil; and when the whole truth is laid bare—as I've sworn it soon shall be—those who've been loudest in their croakings about ghost or demon, will hang their heads in pure shame at having been so thoroughly fooled. You mark my words, Orin Constant!"

"That's all right, Mr. Nesbitt. You'n me hain't goin' to quarrel over the Death-watch. I'll holler louder'n anybody when the pesky critter comes by his uppance; but—waal, ef it's just the same to you, sir, here's hopin' we'll not see hide nor hair of him this trip!"

"If we do—well, let it drop, since you prefer it that way."

For several minutes silence reigned within the Gopher Slope stage, twilight rapidly deepening into night as the vehicle rattled along over the lonely trail with its living freight.

The portly, fine-looking Absalom Nesbitt seemed strangely uneasy for a man of his habit, casting frequent looks out at window as though anticipating the coming of enemy, or some stirring adventure; and it is possible that this restlessness hindered Miss Avis White from sinking into the drowsy repose which soon becomes second nature to one doomed to travel after such a primitive fashion.

A low sigh or two, then her musical voice made itself heard:

"I beg your pardon, sir, but, am I correct in surmising that you reside at Gopher Slope?"

"I—eh? Beg your pardon, Miss—"

"Miss White. I am going to Gopher

Slope, where I've been led to believe mining property is paying good returns on capital wisely invested," came the extremely business-like explanation from those veiled lips. "If I might ask the question—"

"Any information I can give you, Miss White, is heartily at your service," volunteered Mr. Nesbitt.

"An' what the jedge don't know 'bout mines an' minin' property in these yere parts, ma'am, hain't wuth botherin' the pritty head of ye over; no, she hain't, now!" declared Orin Constant, with hearty good will.

"Thanks! Of course I should expect to pay for any services rendered, or advice acted upon. And if I should conclude to invest my surplus capital—"

"My services are entirely at your disposal, Miss White."

"Thanks, once more. Your name was given me when I made some inquiries, over at Silver City."

"Coupled with no evil compliments, I trust, Miss White?" asked the magnate, leaning nearer the veiled passenger, smiling blandly the while, hardly like one in doubt as to the forthcoming answer.

A low laugh told him his pleasant little jest was appreciated; then Miss White spoke again:

"I hold little faith in flattery, Mr. Nesbitt, and so—pray excuse me! Enough that I was advised to consult with you before making any permanent investments in mining property."

"I shall be both proud and happy to serve you in any way, Miss White. If you have formed any definite idea as to what manner of investment you would like to make—"

"Well, sir, hardly that far, as yet; but I did think— Can you tell me aught about a certain property known as the Lucky Strike?"

Innocently enough that query sounded, yet a sudden chill seemed cast over the other passenger, and Nesbitt drew back like one who had unexpectedly encountered a cold bath, while heated.

An awkward silence followed, lasting long enough to make the young lady feel anything but at her ease, as her slightly unsteady voice proclaimed when at length she spoke again:

"I beg pardon if I've said anything I ought not, gentlemen?"

"Ahem! Waal, ma'am, it hain't jest that, ye see, but—ahem!"

"Who advised you to ask me about the—the Lucky Strike?" demanded Nesbitt, as Orin Constant broke down in a stammer.

"No person advised me. I merely chanced to hear the name mentioned while at table, and the oddity of it struck my fancy. If I've made a mistake, in any way, I am sorry for it, sir," averred the young lady.

Absalom Nesbitt drew a quick breath—was it of relief?—as he heard these words, then added in more natural tones:

"Don't think that way for another moment, Miss White. It was only surprise which caused me to start, for the mine now belongs to me, individually, and the name has long been changed to the Coupon."

"Your property? By purchase, may I ask?"

Almost sharply came the query, but, before an answer could be given, the stage was brought to a sudden, even violent halt, and above the startled cry of the driver, rose a clear, stern challenge:

"Hands up!"

With a low, grating cry Nesbitt thrust head out of window for a look ahead, catching glimpse of a glowing skeleton outlined against the dark background, just ahead of the stage in the road!

One glimpse; then he drew back, hand flying up to mouth with a metal whistle through which he blew a shrill, prolonged blast, at the same time dropping between the seats and crouching as close to the floor of the coach as his portly build would permit.

"The Death-watch!"

"The Skeleton Rider!"

"The Black Hand!"

In confused chorus came these cries from the startled passengers within the stage; but, above all sounded that stern voice from without once more:

"Steady, all! No harm shall befall any one of you, save Absalom Nesbitt! All others may go scot-free, but he must pay toll to—"

The road-agent cut himself short at that point, for the rapid clatter of iron-shod hoofs made itself heard, coming up from the rear as though in response to the whistle sent forth by the mining magnate of Gopher Slope!

Around that abrupt bend in the stage-road dashed a squad of armed horsemen, and the moon just then broke through a rift in the storm-cloud which obscured the night-lamps in great degree.

Looking grim and even ghastly against that dark background, the Skeleton Rider sat his now snorting steed, every bone in the human frame outlined as by bluish flame, flickering after a ghostly fashion and rendering that a truly terrifying spectacle to ordinary mortals.

Barely long enough to see that these latest comers wore the garb prescribed by Uncle Sam for his Boys in Blue, then the Skeleton Road-agent wheeled his steed to gallop swiftly away, followed by whistling bullets as Nesbitt fairly roared forth his commands:

"Down him! Kill him! Take him, dead or alive!"

The Man of Fire turned horse abruptly to the left, dashing into a narrow pass between the rocky hills; and as he so vanished, the armed force came up abreast the stage, where one horse stumbled and cast its rider with stunning force.

Marvelously quick for one of his massive—not to say clumsy—build, Nesbitt jumped out of the coach, caught the rising animal by the head, then sprung into saddle and dashed away after the rest of the disguised force, adding his excited cries to their voices.

"Press him hard, lads!" he shouted at top of his voice, as both heels played a savage tattoo on the flanks of his appropriated mount. "Take or kill him, now! Double reward to the lucky man who downs him for good and all!"

"We've got him, or just as good as got him, don't you worry, boss!" pantingly assured one of the riders, as they forged through that narrow cut and came out where they had a more open field for the chase.

The full moon was sailing swiftly along through those thick yet broken masses of dark clouds, lending light sufficient to distinguish the Skeleton Road-agent as he raced on in advance, an indistinct blur of ghostly fire just then, but growing more distinct as obstacles ahead forced his steed to turn at a sharper angle.

Then the pursuers could see that ghostly framework of—surely it was naught more than bones, lit up by the bluish glow of phosphorescent decay and loathsome corruption?

"If he isn't the devil himself, then he must be his spook!" involuntarily broke from one of the armed force as that wild chase swept on under the storm clouds.

"Send a bullet true, and you'll hear him give a mighty human howl!" fiercely cried the magnate, opening fire with his revolver, though still riding in the rear of his force. "To your guns, men! Pour in the lead! You surely can kill or cripple—horse or man, what matter? Only down 'em for good, curse ye!"

Once again the silver orb showed itself, and yonder raced the Skeleton Road-agent at magic pace among those thick-lying rocks, his bony framework glowing as with renewed luster!

The pursuers raised carbines and poured in a hot fire—streams of ruddy flame splitting the darkness, and many pellets of lead whistling through the night in quest of flesh and blood where naught save bones and corruption was visible!

Then the moon passed beneath a dense cloud, casting all below in semi-darkness; yet that glowing skeleton surely ought—Heavens!

That, too, had vanished on the instant, and not even an echo of those swift-fleeing hoofs came to the amazed pursuers!

CHAPTER VI.

MAN, GHOST, OR DEMON?

THIS sudden vanishment seemed like a transformation scene in a spectacular play,

but for a brief space those in hot chase of the Skeleton Rider believed themselves the victims of that veiled moon.

Blinking as they dashed ahead in hopes of again sighting the chase, it took nearly a minute to convince them of the fact: the Skeleton Road-agent had surely given them the slip, just as it had so often foiled other excited pursuers.

"Now I know it's the devil!" exploded one of the armed squad, jerking up his panting horse and so throwing the rest into brief confusion.

"Ye lie!" fairly howled the mining-magnate, urging on his mount with heel and doubled reins. "Hunt him up, boys! Hunt him up, I say! Five hundred dollars cash to the man who first finds and puts a red mark on the slippery hound!"

Himself setting the example, Nesbitt soon had the man-hunt in full swing, the squad separating and skurrying hither and yon to increase their chances of once more sighting their ghostly game.

For, now that cooler reason had chance to come uppermost, one and all argued after pretty much the same fashion: the outlaw had shrewdly taken advantage of that vanishing moon to seek cover, veiling his ghostly light after some as yet unexplained manner, hoping to be passed by in the heat of the chase, thus giving him time and opportunity to foil his enemies once more through doubling on the back-track!

This really seemed to be the most sensible as well as plausible explanation, yet all their beating of coverts failed to rouse their game in that vicinity, and though it seemed impossible for a shod horse to have continued flight across that stony tract unheeded, such must have been the case.

So Absalom Nesbitt declared while fiercely combating the growing superstition which bade fair to render his armed force worse than useless against such an enemy; and he himself set a good example by pressing the search through steadily widening circles.

Few persons who had only met the man in every-day life would have recognized the bland, suave, smiling magnate just now.

The polish of recent years was cast aside, and he more nearly resembled the bold, blunt, aggressive prospector of nearly a generation since.

By urging his men on, promising them additional reward for capturing or slaying the enigma who had caused so much trouble and inflicted much serious loss of late, Nesbitt kept his men to their work, himself doing as much as any two of the others.

He had so surely counted on success this night!

He had baited the trap so adroitly, causing it to be known yet seemingly taking so many extra precautions against the truth leaking out!

Time and again this Death-watch, this Skeleton Road-agent had vowed to take toll from every shipment of money or money's worth in or out of Gopher Slope by Absalom Nesbitt, usurper of the Lucky Strike, alias the Coupon Mine on Hoodoo Hill.

And now, baiting his trap with a package of money, Nesbitt caused an armed force to quietly follow the regular stage for the Slope, disguised as soldiers, ready to close in at his signal and kill or capture the notorious Man of Fire.

It had all seemed so easy, so certain of success! But—

"Rout him out, boys! You've got to find him—just got to find the demon, I tell you!"

Words easily breathed, but far less easily made good!

Nesbitt certainly did all man could to bring about that end, in his fierce disappointment paying little heed to the danger he himself might be running through separating too far from his men.

And so it came to pass that, without sight or sound to give him warning, the mining magnate was surprised by his deadliest enemy!

With a pantherish leap a dark shape pounced upon the rider, gripping throat so tightly as to effectually smother all outcry, then twisting him from the saddle to strike earth with stunning force.

At the same time this assailant prevented the frightened horse from running away, one hand gripping reins as with the other he

fairly dragged Nesbitt to a clump of scrubby bushes!

Here the horse was tied; then the insensible speculator was half-carried, half-dragged away from the spot, making no sound which could draw notice that way from any of the now leaderless squad of pretended soldiers.

Just how long a time passed while he lacked his senses, Absalom never knew, but when consciousness slowly came back to him, he lay in utter darkness, his feet free but his arms effectually bound.

As he gave a muffled groan and strove to rise, a weird light suddenly showed close before him, causing him to shrink back and cower there on those cold stones, for the minute a victim to superstition.

A skeleton outlined in bluish flame, perfect even to the minutest details, the fleshless jaws parted in what seemed to be a grin of fiendish triumph, while little twists of flame writhed and crawled in and out of those eyeless sockets!

A few moments thus; then the Man of Fire moved closer, his bony paws moving forward, to touch and then search the person of his now helpless captive.

That touch which might have still further horrified some men, served in goodly measure to restore the briefly shattered nerve of the magnate, and he writhed desperately as he strove to burst the bonds which held his arms impotent for the time being.

"Let up, you infernal fraud!" he panted as he strove to foil those groping hands.

"When I have reclaimed my own, Absalom Nesbitt," came the deep-toned answer; and, a moment later, those fire-lined members withdrew, claspings a fat wallet. "Said I not ye should never pass in or out of Gopher Slope without paying full toll?"

A half smothered curse was the sole response to this taunt.

By that strange light Nesbitt could see his captor stowing that pocketbook away somewhere about that weird disguise—for now, more than ever, he was convinced that this Skeleton Rider was mortal man instead of ghost, spook or demon.

Squatting there in front of his prisoner, his phosphorescent frame seeming to wave and waver from side to side, giving each prominent bone a snaky semblance, the Skeleton Road-agent spoke again, his deep-pitched voice sounding fairly sepulchral there in that cavernous den.

"Said I not that your ill-gotten gains should never profit you, Absalom Nesbitt? Have not I sworn by all mortal beings hold sacred to never permit you to rest in peace and quietude until you had purged your black soul of past crimes and made full restitution to those your devilish arts have brought to want and even worse?"

"I repeat that sacred oath here and now: those stolen riches shall never prosper or benefit you! Confess your awful sins, make ample restitution ere it is eternally too late!"

One hand of fire was uplifted in additional warning, the bones quivering with that curious bluish glow the while, and then its mate was thrust forward to rest lightly upon the sweat damp brows of Absalom Nesbitt.

Man of iron nerve though he surely was, the speculator shrunk and shivered before that cold and clammy touch, so different from what one would naturally expect from a fiery skeleton like that!

A low, mocking laugh came from those grinning jaws, at this recoil.

"Bah! Coward as well as criminal? Or—was it the Hot Hand you expected to feel, Absalom Nesbitt? Did you think even for a moment that I would stoop so low as to—Quiet, you cur!"

Again that skeleton hand came down, but now to grip and bruise as though each fiery bone was made of finely tempered steel, that force relaxing only when Nesbitt ceased his efforts to burst his bonds.

With an evident effort the hampered man rallied his nerves, and in defiant tones came the words:

"You lie if you even hint that the Coupon isn't legally my own property. I bought and paid for it—"

"With the price of blood, then! But you are the liar, Absalom Nesbitt, for the truth is not in you! The Lucky Strike is mine—all mine, by every law of man and justice! You call it the Coupon, now, but—"

"It is the Coupon, and it belongs to me alone!" defiantly asserted the mine-owner, partially raising himself upon an elbow, bound though his arms were. "Mine—all mine! And I'll defend it against all the world, else. Ay! against man or devil!"

"Man or devil? Ha! ha! ha! I was a man, I am a devil! A devil? Yes, and you made me such, Absalom Nesbitt! Upon your evil head lies the foul wrong, you dastardly assassin!"

"Who are you, then?" demanded the prisoner, his tones grown strangely husky for one so defiant but a few minutes before.

"Who am I? Who was I, then, rather!"

"I was a man, then, working for home and my loved ones; but now—where are they, you demon? Where are they, now? My wife, my child, my home, my—my poor brain, even? Gone—all gone! And you—you robbed me of all, of everything that goes to make up a happy, peaceful life!"

"Murder? Worse than that! You killed, yet you condemned to live on through a never-ending term of mental and physical torture! You slaughtered, yet left sufficient vitality to—to what?"

A bony hand raised to pass lingeringly across that fire-lined skull, then the voice went on, fiercer, more menacing:

"All this I was—all this was I blessed with in those days, ages and eons ago! All this I had, but was most foully robbed of! And you—to you I owe the loss of everything, Absalom Nesbitt!"

"Is it cause for marvel that I vowed bitter vengeance? Do you wonder that I now exist solely in order to wreak upon you the vengeance you merit because of your dastardly crimes? Or that—ah-ha, ye demon!"

"I foolishly thought to prolong your torture, Absalom Nesbitt, but I was wrong—I can see that, now, for—hark, ye devil! Do ye hear it? Ha! ha! 'Tis the death-knell sounding for your last hour, dog!"

Those fiery hands grasped Nesbitt's throat with awful force, and a startled cry came from out yonder utter darkness the next moment.

CHAPTER VII.

POSTPONING THE HOUR OF DOOM.

THE Skeleton Avenger gave a start at that sound, turning to look in the direction from whence the cry proceeded, but without slackening in the least his terrible grip, holding the mine-owner helpless as an infant beneath his knees.

Vainly Nesbitt struggled, a sensation of horror overcoming him as he found himself so helpless.

Until now he had been inclined to scoff at and even scorn this mad enigma as but a petty trickster of low grade, but now—it seemed more like an avenging spirit from a bloody grave!

He struggled, he fought, he tried to free his throat sufficiently to shout for help to be of yonder hidden voice; but all was alike vain, and those fiery bones seemed to swell and increase until naught but a searing flame filled his awfully throbbing eyeballs.

Another voice: that of the Skeleton Rider, now lifted in a taunting laugh which fitly matched that ghostly appearance.

But then, just as Absalom Nesbitt was resigning himself in utter despair, feeling that his death-knell was indeed being rung for the end of all, an abrupt change came over the Skeleton Road-agent, and his dread grip slackened while his crushing weight was lifted.

A gasping breath brought partial relief to those tortured lungs, but the doomed mine-owner lay helpless as a new-born babe, wholly at the mercy of this madman, this demon of the night.

He was dimly conscious of muttered words; doubtless spoken for his benefit, but what they were, or what they pretended, Nesbitt never realized.

He strove to cry aloud for assistance, but only an indistinct sound passed his fevered lips; and ere he could do or say more, he was caught up in the arms of the Skeleton Rider and hurried away—whither?

A refreshing breath of night air came across his face, and the mine magnate caught a glimpse of a couple of brilliant stars glimmering through a rift in the storm-clouds.

This told him he was once more in the outer air, and, in instant later, he was rudely dumped down upon some small stones, while that frame of fire shone fantastically above him as he lay.

Again the Skeleton Rider spoke, and now his speech was plain enough.

"I said that your death-knell was ringing, Absalom Nesbitt, but I was mistaken. Wrong then, right now! Your last hour has not yet struck, for the full penalty due your manifold crimes remains unpaid!"

"What is death such as I came so near measuring forth to you, back yonder? A few brief pangs, a short struggle, then—eternal sleep!"

"Is that sufficient punishment for a foul criminal like your mother's son? No, ten million times over, no!"

Intensely fierce sounded that voice, and those fire-lined arms were flung upward in a passion-gesture.

Brighter and more distinct that ghostly framework showed, tiny serpents of bluish flame curling and twisting and crawling over and around each bone, forming a spectacle both gruesome and awe inspiring.

"Nay, Absalom Nesbitt! Such an ending is far too merciful for such as you! A snarling cur ye have lived, a whining whelp ye shall die!"

"With a glimmer of hope to lead ye on and nerve your hand against pitiless fate, bitter disappointment shall ever dog your footsteps and blight your dearest hopes in life!"

"Every hour, minute and second I will haunt you, by day and by night, in sickness and in health, in solitude or amidst the crowd, in town or in country, waking or sleeping—never for even the space you might measure by a single hurried breath ever again feel free from my awful guardianship!"

"Ye shall go free, yet know yourself hopelessly hampered! Ye may act as though your own man, yet know yourself surely my slave—and a tenfold accursed slave who lives and draws breath solely by my permission!"

"I will foil your every plan, crush your every hope, bring to worse than naught your every scheme for safety to yourself or destruction to your master. And then—when I have driven you to the verge of insanity—then death!"

Nesbitt lay shivering upon the stones, although his face as well as his person was fairly wet with sweat.

Never until now had he realized what a terrible adversary he had armed himself against, openly making his brags of tearing aside that flimsy mask and showing unto all eyes the ass which dared to masquerade under such a lion's skin.

Up to this hour he held his own ideas as to what would be laid bare when that cunning disguise was fairly penetrated; but now, who was this pitiless demon?

"I never—what have I done to deserve such punishment?" he huskily mumbled, his tongue feeling curiously thick, his lips too feverish for clear pronunciation.

A low, fierce laugh was coming from that grim death-head, but at sound of his voice it ceased, the Skeleton Road-agent leaning further forward, like one anxious to catch every word, every syllable.

"What have you done?" echoed the Death-watch, harshly. "What have ye not done, rather!"

"What was I, then, in those happy if toilsome days while wearing my hands to the very bone in work for my loved ones so far away?"

"Do you ask this, Absalom Nesbitt? Shall I tell you what I was, then ask you to consider what I now am?"

Nearer still leaned that awesome shape, and those skeleton hands came closer, working viciously, looking like snakes of crawling flame as they hovered above the mine-owner's face.

Losing his boasted nerve little by little, Absalom Nesbitt shrunk away as far as the nature of his bonds would permit, panting:

"No—don't! I never—before high Heaven I never did you or yours any injury!"

"You lie like the shameless cur you have lived, Absalom Nesbitt!" sternly cried the Skeleton Rider, one cold and clammy-feeling hand falling like a dead weight upon that damp brow.

"I never— Who and what are you, devil?"

With a low, grating laugh the weird shape drew back at this, then almost croakingly came the answer:

"Devil? Ay, I am a devil, now, no matter what I was then! A devil of vengeance, of hatred, of retribution—all this shall ye find me, Absalom Nesbitt!"

"A pitiless devil who only cumbered this once fair earth for a single purpose—to pay off the tremendous score he owes the villain who wrought all this ruin! Who turned him from—from what?"

"Was I ever different?" slowly asked the Man of Fire, one bony hand passing over his death-mask, for the instant blurring and blending together those ghostly marks, only to leave all glowing more vividly than ever an instant later.

"Was I ever a man such as I sometimes dream of? Had I ever a home, a wife, a child who called me father? Did I ever—oh, Satan confound ye for all eternity, Absalom Nesbitt!" he fairly screamed as he rose rigidly erect, both arms uplifted, hands clinched into flickering balls of bluish fire.

A brief space thus; then he broke into a low chuckle, his arms coming down for hands to close upon the shrinking figure of his captive, fairly jerking Nesbitt upon his feet, then forcing him onward through the night, now seeming darker than ever since the moon had buried its face back of yonder skurrying masses.

Soon the low whimper of a horse made itself heard, and pausing beside the tethered creature, the Skeleton Rider swung his prisoner clear of earth much as a lad might toss a bundle of oats, settling him safely in a saddle.

"Steady, Absalom! Your bones are far too precious to risk a fall upon these unfriendly rocks in the darkness, and so—steady, I say!"

For Nesbitt was mechanically striving to rectify what appeared to be an error made in that gloom; he was seated with face to the rear; but the Skeleton Rider held him in position with a hand of iron, while its mate brought a lariat or trail-rope into play, binding him fast to horn and cantle, again laughing in ghoully glee.

"All that's lacking now to perfect the Rogue's March is a brass band and shaven poll, Absalom! I might play barber, but for one thing: to touch your person with cold steel would be equivalent to killing you, and that would be a sin! No, no, you whelp of Satan! A lingering death of unequaled torture: that shall be your reward for all sins!"

Tying the last knot which completed those bonds, the Skeleton Road-agent grasped the bridle-reins and moved away through the night at a brisk pace, evidently having some particular destination in view since he showed no doubt or hesitation as to the proper line to follow.

Now and then his chilling laugh would make itself heard, while occasional sentence or two proved how closely his more or less shattered wits clung to the idea of wrongs to be avenged.

It was a painful journey for Absalom Nesbitt, in more than one sense of the term, but luckily it was of no great duration.

Coming to a halt amidst a waste of bare rocks and gray boulders, the Man of Fire wheeled the burdened horse around so that the helpless rider might gaze upon—what?

"Wait, and ye shall see, Absalom Nesbitt!" spoke his ghostly guide, leaving the animal by that rock, over which he first tossed the long reins. "Now, behold what follows in your evil wake!"

From one outstretched hand came a bright yet phosphorescent glow, revealing a ghastly object propped up against yonder boulder: nothing less than the corpse which had given Silver City Sam such an uncomfortable shock only a few hours earlier!

Full upon that branded face shone the glimmering light, then lowering to more distinctly reveal the sable hand so plainly impressed upon that broad breast.

A gasp which told how complete was the surprise; then a low cry of horror from the lips of the prisoner.

"You pitiless demon! Jonah Cain—dead—murdered! And you did this, you devil from Hades!"

A mocking laugh followed, when the answer came:

"You believe I did this, Absalom Nesbitt, just as other fools will swear that this is but another sample of my dread vengeance. But ye all mistake—ye all lie!"

"Some day, perhaps, my hand may place this sable brand, may send home to the seat of life a blade like unto this," and his fiery fingers moved forward to push aside the iron-gray locks which partially veiled that metal-bound hilt from view.

"The Hand and the knife!" muttered the horror smitten mine-owner. "You demon!"

"But not such an every-day demon as this, Absalom Nesbitt," continued the Skeleton Rider. "The day may come when I will make use of such tools, but that will be only in your case, not in that of your hired emissaries."

"I am your enemy, not theirs. If you wish to rightly solve the enigma of the Black Hand and Red Knife, you must look closer home than to me, Absalom Nesbitt!"

The Man of Fire spoke just as though he meant all he said, but if his words were heard by the mine-owner, they surely were not heeded as they were intended.

Nesbitt stared with horror upon that ghastly spectacle until the light began to fade, and then—hal!

From out the darkness came sudden sounds, followed by the words:

"The Death-watch! Down him—kill him—don't let him get away this time, but—shoot him like a mad dog!"

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW SILVER CITY SAM CHEATED DEATH.

BLENDING with those fierce words came the irregular rattle of exploding firearms, bright flashes briefly lighting up the gloom in that quarter, while more than one pellet of lead gave an unearthly screech as it glanced off from one of the surrounding boulders.

Absalom Nesbitt gave a hoarse scream of fierce joy at those sounds, then crouched as low as possible over the croupe of his uneasy steed, shouting aloud:

"Kill him! A thousand dollars for his head! Don't let him—Kill the devil, I tell ye!"

A mocking laugh burst from the Man of Fire, and where that glowing skeleton had showed so distinctly but an instant before, now was naught save utter darkness!

As though by work of magic the Skeleton Road-agent vanished, leaving the sharpshooters wholly without a target to hurl their lead at!

A brief pause of dismay; then the astonished men rallied, one of their number shouting sternly:

"Jump in, lads! Spread out and take all ye strike, dead or alive! He can't get away! Now with a rush, ye bulldogs!"

He set the example, charging direct for the spot where that ghostly semblance had last been seen, one hand gripping a cocked revolver, its mate held in readiness for a death-grapple.

Here and there his fellows rushed, tripping and stumbling over stones in the gloom, holding but a single thought—to come to close quarters with him of the fiery frame!

It was a blind and aimless charge, yet none could have done better under the same circumstances, and many would have done far less.

Stung by one of those hasty shots, the horse upon which Nesbitt was bound, reared and snapped the bridle short off, wheeling to start away in crazy flight; but, fortunately for the magnate of Gopher Slope, one strong armed fellow caught at that tossing head and maintained his grip until the animal was brought under subjection once more.

"I'm bound fast; cut me loose!" cried Nesbitt, hoarsely.

This was quickly done, when he tumbled rather than sprung out of the saddle, his voice lifted higher than ever.

"Kill that devil, men! Run him down and show him no more mercy than he showed poor Jonah Cain, yonder!"

"Where is he gone? Who was he and—show him to us, then!"

"Hunt him down! Scatter and find—he can't have gone far! I'll pay a cool thousand for him, dead or living!"

Surely that was incentive enough without other inducement, and the little squad of armed citizens made close and thorough search of that vicinity, joined by Nesbitt who constantly urged them on, even after he must have felt further quest was useless.

That search lasted until none could muster further hope, after which the vain quest was reluctantly abandoned for that time.

The men gathered at the point where the luckless superintendent of the Coupon Mine had met his grim fate, and there Absalom Nesbitt struck a light to take a more thorough view of the corpse.

A grim spectacle, surely!

The double brand, the knife which yet remained in the death-wound, the expression of unutterable horror which was death-frozen upon that bronzed face: all combined to send a cold chill creeping through each man's veins.

But this quickly gave place to a glow of fierce vengeance, and both loud and deep were the curses showered upon the Death-watch to whom alone this foul deed could be attributed.

After another useless search for the missing slayer, the quest was abandoned for that night, and under direction of Nesbitt, the branded corpse was lifted from the rocks and bound in place upon the wounded horse.

Then, slowly picking the way through the darkness, relieved at intervals by the sailing moon, the little company took up their journey to Gopher Slope.

Meanwhile, what of the Skeleton Rider?

As he gave that mocking laugh, the mysterious being crouched low down to earth, at the same time shaking free a thin but ample cloak from around his neck and shoulders, and covered by this as with a sable pall, he swept swiftly away through those thick-lying rocks which shielded his person from the fast-flying lead.

His movements were so nearly noiseless as to seem fairly supernatural, and with naught to guide either aim or grip, little wonder that the men from Gopher Slope were wholly at a loss.

Thus giving his enemies the slip, the Skeleton Rider hurried away through the darkness, swinging around in order to again strike the point where he had mounted Absalom Nesbitt upon the horse for his ride to the branded corpse.

Pausing near this place long enough to make fairly sure none of his enemies were on the right scent, the Man of Fire, still closely wrapped in his gossamer-like cloak, silently moved on to the cunningly concealed mouth of a cave; entering, he found himself once more at home.

A few rapid movements served to remove all traces of that curious fire which glowed but never burned; then, he moved onward for a brief space, only coming to a halt when a sharp voice broke the silence ahead:

"Who's there?"

As though that challenge formed a signal, the skeleton of fire once more flamed up, serving to illumine a space of several feet around the strange being who had been so busy that night; and as it moved forward a few yards, another shape was brought into the ghostly light.

A pale yet stern face, with big eyes on the alert—face and eyes both belonging to the Silver City delegate!

A brief silence, then Sheldon spoke again:

"Who and what are you, anyway? Speak out! You can't scare me with your humbuggery, old cock!"

A brief laugh came from the death-mask, as though its owner was pleased rather than offended by that blunt address. And then the Skeleton Rider spoke up in turn:

"Who am I, do you ask?"

"I know what men call you, but I'd rather hear what you have to say for your own self, first. So, once more: what and who are you?"

"For one thing, I am the person who saved you from death or broken bones, this evening, early," came the steady response. "You fell down the old shaft where—"

"Fell?" echoed Silver City Sam, with a touch of indignation in his denial. "No, I

never fell. Those dirty whelps dumped me when I couldn't help myself; and if I ever—"

"Peace, stranger!" came the interruption, as one hand of fire lifted in a quick gesture. "I have no wish to pry into your private affairs, even as I would resent inquisition in my own case. So, one word further, I pray you."

"When you came down here, you struck partly upon me, partly upon my good steed, and that served to break your fall, for which—"

"For which I owe you many thanks, noble spook!" broke in Silver City Sam, with a vein of earnestness underlying that light tone. "Unless— I say, most noble spook!" "Beware of saying too much, foolish boy!"

"Oh, I say, now! If I'm a boy, where'd you get your men?" demanded the High-roller, in a tone of injured pride.

But the jest seemed wholly wasted upon that strange being, and in even tones the Skeleton Road-agent spoke on:

"As I explained, you owe your life to me and to my horse, although we had no means of knowing what was about to happen. Still, we did save you from broken bones, if no worse."

"For all of which I'm willing to pay full price when my ship comes in. And—when does my turn to preach roll 'round, gentle ghost?"

"Wait," with another imperious gesture. "If ever your story is told unto men, they will call you liar unless— Yet your face is hardly that of a treacherous cur!"

"If it was, I'd sue it for libel!" declared the man from Silver City, with an undercurrent of earnestness which could not be easily misinterpreted. "But, since you seem to lean that way, why have you trussed me up so mighty snugly?"

"In order to make sure my intuition was not false. First: what have you seen and heard since you regained your senses?"

There was a brief pause; then Silver City Sam asked a question in his turn:

"Shall I answer that query as though you asked it, sir, or as if it came from the lips of an outsider?"

"Should I say the last?"

"Do you put it in that shape, though?"

"I do."

"Then, haven't seen a blamed thing, and I've heard twice as little," came the instant response.

"If I really thought you meant all that!"

"Well, sir, I can't offer my hand to back up my word, for reasons which I reckon you know just as well as I could tell you," spoke the bound detective, "but I'll say just this much more:

"You saved my life. I'm white and free-born. I wear no man's collar save my own. And whether or no you ask a solemn pledge to that effect, I mean to hold my hush about the manner in which I cheated the death those two precious scoundrels planned for my especial benefit."

Silver City Sam ceased like a man who had fully said his say, and for a brief space silence reigned there in the subterranean retreat.

Presently the Skeleton Rider broke that silence with the words:

"You may be no better than other men I've met, to my sorrow; yet I feel that I can trust you this far. Now, listen, please!"

"Promise me, on the honor of a man and a gentleman, that you will never reveal aught you may have seen or heard while lying here in bonds. That you will never seek to return to this spot, either by day or by night, on your own account or through the will of any other living being."

"Will you give me this pledge in return for your liberty, sir?"

"I give you my word of honor, and if I ever break it in letter or in spirit, may I take another tumble without your being there to save my miserable neck," promptly promised the prisoner.

His pledge was accepted, and a moment later his bonds yielded to the edge of a keen blade, and that hand of fire assisted him to his feet.

"Permit me to bandage your eyes for a few minutes," gravely said the Skeleton Rider, suiting action to words.

Silver City Sam made no resistance, whatever he may have felt, for he knew that this was escaping far more cheaply than he had any right to expect, after all he had heard concerning this living enigma.

When his eyes were securely bandaged, he was led away for a considerable distance, presently emerging from the tunnel or cave into open air, as he could readily tell. Then, after a winding journey, he was halted while his grim guide spoke quickly:

"Wait here while you can count one hundred beats of your pulse, then you are at liberty to go your way—under oath!"

After counting one hundred, Sheldon removed the bandage, to find himself standing in the stage-road, with the lights of Gopher Slope in sight!

CHAPTER IX.

A WARNING IN RED AND BLACK.

ALTHOUGH it was considerably later than his customary hour when he sought his virtuous couch under the roof-tree of the Carbonate Hotel that night, Absalom Nesbitt was out of bed at an early hour the next morning.

Very little sleep had visited his eyes during those brief hours of darkness, and when ever he did doze away, 'twas but to struggle with terrifying visions of death in life, where he was tight-locked in death-grapple with some fiery skeleton, or whirling in a crazy waltz with a branded corpse to music of shin-bones and fleshless fingers.

Rising, then, in the gray of early dawn, Absalom pushed aside the curtain of dark calico, then stood in front of his small mirror, turning head from side to side in order to more closely inspect his sore throat.

Time and again had he dreamed of its bearing that ugly brand of the Sable Hand, and even now he could hardly satisfy himself no such misfortune had befallen him.

Sore, painful, swollen, and bearing slightly discolored marks to testify how fiercely those skeleton fingers had held their grip; but he failed to find the burnt and blistered brand which had grown so notorious of recent days.

"That devil! I thought—I feared— Who was he, anyway?"

An answer was ready, but the mine magnate choked it back with a half-nervous shudder as he flashed a quick glance around the chamber.

"No! He's dead and— Ugh! And even if he should be living— But he isn't, and it can't be—just can't be—that!"

Muttering thus the magnate turned from the glass to complete his toilet, dressing with unusual care, although for years past he had been rather noted for his sleek and comely array.

And as he dressed, muttered sentences dropped from his lips, some disconnected and far from coherent, but others coming in closer sequence and indicating a vein of argument which might mean far more than showed upon the surface.

"A devil—surely he was that? If not, how could he contrive to foolish us all, so often? And yet, was he?"

"What made him charge me with— What did he mean by my ill-gotten gains? And, the Lucky Strike! If I thought—but, that's nonsense: worse than nonsense!"

"He's dead—too dead for kicking, even! And—if it should be he? If Martin White—and that girl: she asked about the Lucky Strike, and she gave the name of—could she be any relative of—bah!"

Absalom Nesbitt clinched a fat hand and made a savage stroke at the empty vision thus unwillingly summoned.

For nearly a minute he said nothing more, continuing his matutinal arrangements with hurried movements.

But the ghost of the past would not down so readily, and presently further mutterings grew audible.

"He's dead—surely dead! And yet it sounded almost as though Martin White had come back to ask— Who else could know about the old mine, and the manner in which— Steady, Ab. Nesbitt!"

Again he checked an unruly tongue, moving in front of the glass to put the finishing touches to his toilet, scowling darkly as he

saw those discolored spots telling where the fingers of fire had bruised if they did not burn.

Just as he was settling his collar and smoothing out his silken tie, Nesbitt was startled by a sound of rapid footsteps without, then a half-dozen sharp raps assailed his chamber door on the outer side.

"Who's there? What's wanting?"

"Only me: Perry Castle, boss. More nasty work over by the big tree, so I thought— Reckon maybe you'd better turn out, sir, for— Oh!"

The burly henchman recoiled as that barrier swung sharply open, to reveal the wholly-dressed magnate, hat on head and cane in hand.

"The bullet in tree do you mean, Castle?"

"That's what's the matter, sir. I was just—"

"What's gone wrong over yonder?"

"Well, that notice you had posted, sir, calling for a superintendent for the mine—"

"I know: what about it?"

"More devil's work!" declared the excited man. "The Death-watch was here, last night, and—"

"The Death-watch?" echoed Nesbitt, scowling. "You're gone crazy, man! I don't believe any such trash as that!"

"Then come and see for your own self!" fairly exploded Castle, beating a retreat as rapid as had been his advance.

Nesbitt followed, quickly descending the flight of narrow stairs and emerging from the hotel in the early morning.

Although that threatening storm had passed by without actually breaking or letting rain fall, it had cleared the atmosphere and all was fresh and bracing.

Early though the hour was, the mine-owner found others afoot in the now golden dawn, and his naturally florid face faded somewhat as he came in sight of the great pine which was locally known as the "bulletin-tree."

Already quite a little crowd had gathered there, one and all showing strong interest in—what?

Above their heads was a board, to which a large sheet of paper had been tacked, and now—Nesbitt gave a muttered imprecation as his still keen eyes caught sight of those significant additions.

"Make way, please!" he sternly spoke, and strode on until fairly in front of the bulletin-board.

Upon that board was fastened the notice he himself had dictated when he found Jonah Cain was stubbornly deaf to all the arguments he could offer.

That notice was headed in big capitals

"WANTED."

and beneath the bold caption ran the words:

"A Superintendent, to run the Coupon, on Hoodoo Hill, strictly in the interests of the owners. No coward need apply, but double wages await the right sort of man. Apply to A. Nesbitt, Esq."

The gentleman whose name was thereto appended did not stop to read those printed lines just then, for he had fresher food for interest.

An addition had been made to his advertisement, and that of a truly unique nature: a veritable warning in red and black!

A sable right hand was clearly impressed upon the white paper, and just over it showed the bloody blade of a bowie-knife, the keen point of which had been driven through the board and deep into the tree itself.

It was by no means difficult to comprehend what sort of warning was conveyed by those significant additions, and Nesbitt caught his breath sharply as he cast an almost involuntary glance around him.

Quite a little crowd had gathered near the bulletin-tree, warned of what had happened, and among these curious spectators Absalom took more particular notice of a tall, graceful, more than comely "sport" in silk hat and "boiled shirt," known as "Doc," "Doc Brierly," whose jetty mustaches were just then slightly curling with a half-amused, half-cynical smile.

"Good-morning, Judge!" was his easy salutation, accompanied by a nod of friendly recognition. "An eye-opener, if not exactly an appetizer, isn't it?"

"If I thought— Who has dared play such a clumsy joke?"

No immediate answer came to this angry demand, but looks were interchanged, and broad shoulders were shrugged significantly.

"Doc" smiled anew, one white hand going up to smooth his immaculate mustaches, or to mask a mirth which uncomfortably stung the magnate of Gopher Slope.

"Well, Judge, if a jest, it's one which both cuts and blisters," was his next remark. "One can hardly say that he don't know where to look for the point, even if he can't see it at first glance!"

A little laugh greeted this sally, yet it was plain the greater part of that assembly felt awed rather than amused.

This was not the first time those silent warnings had been made visible, and nearly as often death or loss had either borne them company or closely followed after.

"If I only knew— What does all this tomfoolery mean, anyhow?"

Nesbitt scarcely realized what words were passing his lips, for his rage was growing furious, all the more because he felt his own impotence so acutely.

Doc Brierly laughed again, this time without taking the trouble to mask his amusement, and a moment later offered his interpretation of those grim symbols.

"Surely you ought not to feel at a loss, Judge? The hint is sufficiently plain for a blind man to read as he runs."

"It's a hint that— What do you mean, anyway?"

"You offer double wages for a superintendent, and—right there they are! Black Hand and Bloody Knife! And the Death-watch stands pledged to pay full wages to the new official!"

A low murmur ran through the crowd; then Esau Gray spoke up from where he stood near the outer edge of that assemblage:

"Only a fool would think of taking the situation after such a hint as this!"

"Better fool than knave, my croaker, and I'll fill the position unless a better man slips in ahead of me!"

A clear voice with a manly ring to it, coming from only a few feet away from the other speaker; but Esau Gray gave a low exclamation and half crouched as he turned swiftly at those words.

His face turned pale as its coating of sun-paint would permit, for he saw before him the handsome face of the Silver City delegate, looking marvelously alive and healthy for a corpse!

"I never— Satan burn you!" Esau gasped then rallying as swiftly he jerked pistol from scabbard and flung it forward as though he would add murder to that curse.

But Silver City Sam "had been there before," and with a supple swaying of his body, he caught that wrist and turned the weapon aside, then shot out his good right arm and tightly-clinched fist.

CHAPTER X.

THE COOL HAND FROM SILVER CITY.

SWIFT as thought and heavy as fate fell that blow, and stout knave though he undoubtedly was, Esau Gray left his feet and pitched backward, fairly knocked out of time.

At the same instant he delivered his blow, Silver City Sam dexterously twisted that dangerous weapon out of the fellow's hand, giving it a toss in air which sent the pistol whirling over the startled crowd and far away, to be lost for the time being.

Without giving Esau a glance, Sheldon steadied himself, both hands arming on the instant as he flashed a keen look around.

With an easy gesture his arms bent upward until those grim muzzles rested lightly against his shoulders, in which position the representative from Silver City tersely spoke:

"Keep your linen on, gentlemen, I beg of you! I never did care about getting plugged by a cur, and so—will you go easy, Mr. Jack Ellison?"

One of those weapons smoothly shifted position to catch the drop upon a second startled knave, but instead of shooting, Silver City Sam merely spoke:

"Try to use that gun, Jacky, and I'll turn your heels up for all time! And you, gentlemen—one word, please!"

"Who and what are you to come ruffling around here after this fashion?" sternly demanded Doc Brierly, moving a bit nearer that center of interest.

"Half-white and free-born, no less! This is a private quarrel of ours, and no gentleman will thrust in his oar without invitation. I know enough of Gopher Slope to feel assured of so much, anyway! How is it, my good friends?"

This was an adroit appeal, and brought an instant response.

"Give 'em room a'cordin'!"

"Pen 'em up an' let 'em fight it out, wild bull an' grizzly b'ar fashion! Whooray fer the fun, anyhow, an' durn the expense!"

Silver City Sam smiled broadly at this, for he felt fairly well assured that no double-banking would be permitted on this occasion.

"That's all right, and I'll play either one of those gentle pets, gentlemen; only—Esau has turned out to pasture, and Jacky couldn't be hauled into such an arena with log-chains and ten yoke of oxen!"

Ellison made another move, but that menacing muzzle stared him full in the face, and he dared go no further.

Silver City Sam felt that he held the key to the situation at present, but he knew, too, how fickle such an assembly can show itself, and he deemed it wisest to make his own position as clear as might be.

"As I said, gentlemen, this is a sort of private quarrel, but there's no such mighty secret about it, after all."

"The facts run something like this, and—Hold your hush, Jacky, or I'll sink a mineral shaft clean through that hat-rack of yours!"

"Give the man a fair show, can't you?" sternly cut in Brierly.

"If I'm not giving him heap sight fairer show than he gave me when we first met up with each other, then I'll eat my hat and you can have what's left, stranger!"

"Don't you believe him if he says—"

"Button that lip, Jack Ellison, or you'll hit another snag right where you live," coldly warned Perry Castle, gun out and held in readiness for prompt use. "And you, stranger, talk a chalk-line, for there's one big black mark scored against you, already!"

"Merely a modern instance of poor dog Tray, pardner!" coolly asserted the Silver City representative, as he recognized the burly citizen. "If I don't show that to your perfect satisfaction—"

"Business!"

"All right, and business goes! Now—hear my sweet bazoo, all!"

"We met by chance, Esau, Jacky and I. It just happened so, you understand, so far as I was concerned, although I'm not so mighty certain about the other two-thirds of that meeting; but you can judge for yourselves later on."

It so happened that I helped those two sweet-scented ducks out of a pretty tight box, because I really believed they were being wrongfully imposed upon.

"Instead, I now believe I was in the wrong, and I stand ready to beg humble pardon of the gentlemen I interfered with on that occasion."

Silver City Sam smiled broadly as he gave an affable nod in the direction of Perry Castle, but that worthy made no sign, lost no whit of his stern bearing or dark scowl as he stood gun in hand.

"Wasn't you in the same box?" surlily demanded Ellison, yet fearing to make a more aggressive defense so long as that revolver pointed his way with such annoying accuracy.

"Like old Tray of the blue speller; just so," came the ready retort. "But don't forget that I'm telling this little story, Jacky!"

"Tell it straight, then, curse ye!"

"Straight as a good rope with one end over a stout limb and the other hugging your blessed neck, Jacky! Now—to you, gentlemen!"

"I got those two knaves out of an ugly scrape, thinking them as innocent of all wrong as my own mother's darling; and—what was my reward?"

"Just this: they fell behind far enough to slug me from the rear, in the dusk, then dumped me into an old shaft, just as though I didn't cost a red cent, and me wearing my Sunday-go-to-meetingss too!"

This blunt accusation caused quite a little sensation among the assembly, but Jack Ellison was stung into an angry denial, savagely bursting out with:

"That's an infernal lie, for— Don't shoot!"

With a pantherish leap Silver City Sam crossed nearly all the ground lying between them, thrusting his revolver fairly into the pale face of the exposed rascal, sternly crying out:

"Take back the lie, you scoundrel! Eat your words or chaw lead!"

"Don't—don't shoot!"

"I will shoot, and shoot to kill without you apologize for— Eat that lie, you cur!"

The sole alternative appeared to be death, and Ellison was not ready for that departure from this world. He shrunk a bit, but that ugly muzzle followed him just as closely, those blue eyes fairly ablaze as they enforced that stern command.

"Talk or croak, Jacky!"

Ellison hardly knew what words passed his lips, further than that he meant to save his life by apologizing; but Silver City Sam seemed satisfied with the empty form, and with a touch of scorn underlying his words, he added:

"That's sufficient, Jacky. Now, take a fool's advice and pretend you're half-way decent after this. And—better look to your pardner yonder, or he may over-sleep his dinner!"

Gladly enough Ellison turned to bend over the still prostrate shape of Esau Gray, while Silver City Sam resumed his interrupted explanation.

"I reckon you've got the heft of it all, gentlemen, but I'll just say this much more, and I'm saying it the same as though I was on oath."

"Those two curs downed me from behind, and then dumped me down some sort of hole in the ground: a deserted shaft, I fancy!"

Through all Doc Brierly had listened with the rest, but now a smile of incredulity curled his neat mustaches, and he sharply asked:

"If 'twas a deserted shaft, and you was first knocked stiff, how did you escape it all, stranger?"

Silver City Sam stood face to face, eye to eye for a little while, then his own lip curled, and he crisply made retort:

"Fell on a big chunk of compressed air, and that saved my precious bones. Climbed up a moonbeam, and that took me out of the hole. Anything else, my dear sir?"

This shot was of the right caliber to fit the crowd, and a pretty general laugh followed it up.

Doc Brierly shrugged his shapely shoulders as he turned away, evidently feeling it below his level to measure wits with this ready-tongued stranger.

On his part, Silver City Sam moved a bit closer to the bulletin-pine, coolly reading that defaced sign before taking further action; but when he had sufficiently mastered that notice, he turned toward Absalom Nesbitt as though guided by pure instinct, quietly speaking:

"I'll take that situation, sir, if you'll take me."

Nesbitt looked keenly at his face and figure, summing this cool hand up after his own peculiar fashion before making reply.

"What do you know about mining, first?" he asked, bluntly.

"Not much, that's an honest fact, sir: but I'm a man, and that seems to be the main qualification for the place, judging from your sign. I know enough to boss others at work, and if this genius of the Black Hand and Bloody Knife—"

"Well?"

"I'll make it well," came the coolly confident addition.

"Who are you, anyway?"

"As for my name, that is Samuel Sheldon, sometimes called Silver City Sam. As for my business, I'm one of those peculiar cusses they call detectives, and—"

"You are—what?"

"A detective, if you'll let me claim the title. A detective out of a job, too as luck would have it. And so—well, when I sat around listening to all these bugaboo yarns about a Skeleton Rider, a Death-watch, a Black Hand and Bloody Knife spook—I reckoned maybe I might make a ten-strike by moseying over the range to this section."

"Right there you have it in a solid chunk, Mr. Nesbitt. Take me, and if I don't do you good, I'll never do you harm. Anyway, you'll not be called upon to furnish the sand to fill my craw in case of trouble."

"How much of this is wind, and how much solid business?" shrewdly asked the mine-owner, after a brief scrutiny of that boldly handsome countenance.

"That shows you don't know a man when you see him, in spite of your advertising for one," coolly retorted Sheldon. "All right, and we'll play I never asked for a job."

"Wait, man; don't be in such a mighty rush. If I thought you could do even one-half what you hint at—"

"Beg pardon, sir, but I neither hint nor make my brags. I'm not trying to squeeze a situation out of you, for I can worry along without working for wages if I have to."

"I came over mainly to buck against this spookish outfit, but when I saw this sign—well, there's no sin in trying to combine business with pleasure, that I know of?"

"Of course not, sir, and I'm not so certain—If I thought you could fill the place—"

"Don't think anything more about it, I beg of you, sir, for now I'm not so mighty sure I care to accept the place," coolly cut in the Man from Silver City, turning away and drawing a bit nearer the spot to which Ellison had removed his temporarily disabled comrade.

By this time Esau Gray had regained his consciousness, although he still looked dazed and far from himself. One jaw was discolored and rapidly swelling up where that steel-like fist had smote it, and Silver City Sam smiled grimly as he took note of his handiwork.

"Waking up, are you?" was his cool salutation, paying no attention to those ugly scowls which greeted his coming. "That's right. 'Twould have cost me a bucket of salty tears had I knocked your fool' head off its base; and that's a scandalous fact!"

"I'll pay you off for this if it kills me!" hoarsely vowed Gray.

"That's just what I intruded on you for. You'll find my office always open whenever you care for a scrimmage; but—mind this, both!"

"Don't bother unless you mean solid business. I put up at the Carbonate until further notice. So-long, my brace of beauties!" and Silver City Sam moved leisurely away, arms akimbo and hat rakishly cocked.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MAGNATE SEEKS ADVICE.

SILVER CITY SAM'S movements were closely watched by Absalom Nesbitt, the interest awakened by this cool hand from up-country apparently overshadowing that which had brought him abroad at such an early hour.

The mine-owner seemed widely awake, now, and clearly had rallied from his temporary loss of nerve at sight of the all too significant symbols.

His full lip curled just a trifle as he saw how jauntily Sheldon moved away after letting fall that thinly-disguised warning, and he gave a half-nod of approval while taking in those graceful yet athletic outlines.

"He'd ought to be a good man if he can act as well as he talks," was his terse comment; then he wheeled to again face the pine tree against which his "want" had been posted.

He appeared to study both hand and knife; then he produced a blue pencil, and reaching upward, made a few strokes watched with interest by the crowd remaining.

In bold, distinct characters all might read that addition:

"\$500.00 for the owner of this knife!"

Pausing only long enough to make sure his meaning had been fairly set forth, Nesbitt turned with back to the bulletin-tree,

removing his silk hat and lifting the right hand like one asking attention.

Instant silence followed, to be broken a few seconds later by the mine-owner.

"Friends and fellow-citizens! Although it seems hardly necessary for me to expend good breath over such an insolent outrage as this, I feel as though I'd better say a few words, more for Gopher Slope and its fair fame than for my own credit, however."

"There is not a living soul within reach of my voice this morning but knows right well how bitterly disgraced we all have been by this infernal trickster and abominable assassin the Death-watch, Skeleton Rider, Black Hand—what ye will!"

"By any other name he'd stink just as loud!" bluntly declared big Perry Castle.

"Which would not so much matter, were it not that Gopher Slope and all who owe this fair city allegiance are cast into ill odor on his account! So long as such vile outrages are permitted to take place without punishment, just so long will we remain a laughing-stock for outsiders!"

"It's not this insult I'm minding so much, gentlemen," with a wave of his fat hand toward that mutilated poster. "That is bad enough, but how much worse when a human life is snuffed out like a—like poor Jonah Cain was squelched, only last night, or yesterday, rather!"

An ominous sound ran through the crowd, and brows darkened while toil-hardened hands gripped weapons with vengeful force.

"If that killing had been the first, one might set it down to a private grudge, or personal feud, but we all know different from that. It is because Cain was in my employ; because Jonah worked at the Coupon for wages; because some cunning demon thinks to scare me into abandoning this field and sacrificing my hard-earned property for a song!"

"That I'll never do, though refusing may cost me my life. I'll fight it out on this line, let Satan himself enlist against me!"

"But, friends, one and all; don't forget that this shames and disgraces you to the full as much, and that nothing less than the death or capture of this infernal trickster will wipe away the foul blot!"

"Now, I'll give five hundred dollars for the person who planted this knife and made this brand upon my advertisement!"

"I'll give twice as much for the villain who plays the Death-watch, and I'll pay the cold cash for his dead body if that comes easier than taking him alive!"

"Of course the offer of head-money alone won't do the job, but I feel confident that all honest citizens will join hands with me in trying to rid this section of such a curse and general disgrace to the community."

With those words by way of finishing-touch, Nesbitt put on his hat and strode from the bulletin-tree, at the same time making a covert signal which did not escape the watchful eye of Perry Castle.

Apparently forgetting that he had gone abroad without first taking his customary meal, Nesbitt passed through a portion of the town until reaching the rather diminutive structure which served him as office and headquarters in general, where he was shortly after joined by Castle.

The latter wore an expectant look, and he was not kept long in suspense as to the meaning of that signal, for the mine-owner bluntly said:

"What do you think of that fellow, Castle?"

"Silver City, sir?"

"Of course. What do you make of him, anyway?"

"Well, sir, I reckon he's a mighty good little man, after all, if I did make a mistake in jumping him so brash, last evening."

"How was that? He wasn't singing a fairy tale, then, over yonder?"

"Well, scarcely he wasn't!" avowed Castle, with a grim smile as he recalled his own discomfiture of the past evening.

Nesbitt seemed curious to hear the whole story, and Castle lost little time in gratifying his wishes.

He told a straight yarn, making no effort to gloss over his own far from brilliant role, giving the Silver City delegate all the credit due.

"I wouldn't have believed it if anybody'd told me ahead of time, sir, but there she was:

knocked me out without half trying, then gave the other boys such a holy bounce their joints haven't got fairly limbered up yet!"

"If he was dealing on the square, why take such long chances?"

"Well, that's pretty much the way I looked at it, first-off," frankly admitted Castle, with a half-rueful grin.

"And later on?"

"I ciphered it cut altogether different. You see, sir, I don't mind owning up that I was rubbing in the dirt pretty smart, for the sight of Jonah, all branded like—ugh!"

"Pass that. Go on."

"That made me sweat under the collar, and I reckon Samuel thought 'twas going to be hanging before trying. Anyway, he gave me the grand dump, and served the boys pretty much the same fashion, then left us to mosey home as best we might with fins hitched to the rear."

"You don't think this cool hand is—can he be this infernal Death-watch, think?"

Nesbitt lowered his tone and flashed a swift glance around before putting that fancy as a question; but Perry Castle shook his head decidedly.

"No, sir; I'd take my Bible-oath he isn't."

The mine-owner frowned darkly, pinching his full under-lip with thumb and forefinger as he stared at vacancy for a few moments; then he abruptly asked:

"Who can it be, then? Who could, or who would play such a risky part for what can be made by it?"

Perry hesitated, but only for a moment, then responding:

"Well, sir, I'm thinking Esau Gray and Jack Ellison could do a little talking if they were pinched after the right fashion!"

"What! You surely don't think they are this demon?"

"No, not just that, sir," was the response. "But their boss may be it!"

"You mean—surely not Brierly?"

Evidently that hint was powerfully stirring the mine-owner, for he betrayed unusual agitation; but Castle held his own right well, giving a grim nod as he spoke on:

"That's the name, sir, and if it wasn't for one thing—"

"What thing is that?"

"Martin White—"

"Drop that, you fool!" exploded Nesbitt, with savage emphasis. "He's dead and done for, long since! He's out of the question, as no man knows better than yourself."

"Drop it goes, sir," obediently yielded the henchman. "And that puts me back to where I was before. Doc Brierly; I mean it, too," as the mine-owner shook his head.

"It can't be; simply absurd and impossible, Castle!"

"Why so? Those fellows sneeze whenever Doc Brierly takes snuff, and let him point a finger and either Gray or Ellison would go hot-foot to Satan's home. That is, they stand ready to do what he plans."

"But I can't see—why would he run such mighty risks?"

"Not without hopes of getting well paid, be sure of that," quickly retorted the other.

"How paid, though?"

"Well, the Coupon would pay mighty long profits if allowed to run straight, wouldn't she?"

"Of course; but, as it stands now—"

"She's falling in value day by day; just so! And that, maybe, explains it all. Brierly has offered to take the property off your hands, hasn't he?"

"Yes, but he laughed at my figures."

"Just so. But if you are forced to sell at his figures, 'twould be big money in his pocket, provided the Death-watch should grow tired of playing the spookish devil just about that same time. Wouldn't it?"

But Nesbitt shook his head once more, like one far from being convinced by the reasoning, shrewd though Castle evidently considered it.

"All right, boss, and I'm not kicking. You asked my opinion, and I've given it for what's its worth. Now, what else can I do for you?"

There was no immediate response, Nesbitt sitting motionless, hands on widely separated knees, head drooping almost to his chest, eyes fixed on the bare pine floor.

After a bit he looked up, speaking abruptly:

"I say, Castle!"

"Say it, boss."
 "What do you think about hiring this Silver City Sam as superintendent of the Coupon, anyway?"

CHAPTER XII.

AN OPENING FOR SILVER CITY SAM.

"To work, or to fight the demon?"
 "Well, call it both. Do you reckon he could fairly fill the bill?"

"He'd make a fair stagger at it, I reckon. And being a new hand at the bellows, maybe he'd make a better fist at it than any of the rest of us could."

"Unless he's in the scheme, himself!" dubiously muttered Nesbitt, ugly doubts refusing to down at his will.

"If so, wouldn't it be better so have the fellow right where you would know where to find him?" shrewdly questioned Castle.

"Maybe it would, and so—go look him up and fetch him here, will you, Castle?"

"All right, boss; the fetch goes."

Perry left the office, and its owner sunk into deep thought when left alone, passing an ugly half-hour.

Was it man, ghost or devil haunting him of recent weeks?

Could it be that, after all, these blood-chilling events had naught to do with the past over which he had drawn a dark veil, but were merely cunning schemes to swindle him out of his nearly priceless mine?

Was Doc Brierly playing an audacious game for the Coupon?

True, the gambler, sport, man of chance, had made him such offer when the whole of Gopher Slope was shaken from center to circumference by an unusually bold crime, ostensibly committed by the "Death-watch," but had he been so deeply in earnest?

"No, I can't make it seem that way!" Nesbitt told himself as he sat there striving to bring light out of darkness. "He'd take it at a tenth of its true valuation, just as he'd pick up the long end of any bet, for a flyer; but—no, no! I've got to look further than Doc Brierly!"

And his memory turned back much further; turned back to the days of old, when Gopher Slope was yet unborn, when the Coupon was the Lucky Strike, and one of those who held the strongest faith in its glorious future was named—Martin White.

But, he was dead: dead and turned to nothingness, long since!

"That girl—her name—and why did she call the Coupon by that old title? White—Miss White, she said! And—old Martin used to prate and prose about a little girl who'd welcome his coming home with a fortune breaking his back to carry! And—"

Nesbitt looked warily around him, through the two dingy windows, out at the open door, then breathed barely above his breath:

"If this should be Martin's little girl, better not—she'll not live to wear gray hairs unless—ugh!"

He broke off with a little shiver as though struck by a cold draft, and banishing that fair face he recalled the time he had seen those grim symbols of black hand and red-dened blade.

Thrice had he seen them in connection with dead men. Jonah Cain made the third victim, all similarly marked with the hand and carrying the knife.

Three victims, and each one intimately connected with the Coupon!

Besides these, many mysteriously delivered warnings had come to himself, all bearing those brands, or else signed "Death-watch."

No one seemed able to explain the mystery, and no reward he might offer had as yet brought even the faintest clue to the author of those warnings, those atrocious crimes.

When all this is taken into consideration, it is hardly to be marveled at that the mine magnate gave a glad start as he recognized the heavy tread of his returning messenger, or that his full face lighted up with a semblance of joy as he caught sight of both Castle and Silver City Sam.

The two men crossed that threshold at his invitation, and with an admirable air of business, Sheldon broke the ice at once:

"I understand you wish to see me on business, Mr. Nesbitt; how can I serve you, sir?"

"Take a seat, please. Yes, I have faith you can serve me, and at the same time serve yourself, Mr. Sheldon. Still, as a pure matter of business I'd like to ask a few questions before making any positive offer."

"All right! Fire away!"

Nesbitt promptly availed himself of that permission, and his queries were answered as quickly as made, the man from up-country apparently having naught to conceal.

According to his own account he was a genuine free lance, wearing no man's collar save by his own choice, and then only so long as he was "making good money" by so serving another.

Without making any actually damaging admission, too, it seemed that Samuel was a little lower than the saints, and hardly troubled by inconvenient scruples.

This portion of the inquisition seemed to particularly please the magnate, and Perry Castle likewise smiled approval as he gave a curt nod from under cover.

"Then you came to Gopher Slope looking for a paying job?" finally asked the mine-owner.

"Well, hardly a job, after the way you look at it," quickly asserted Silver City Sam. "I took a bet that no man living could make head or tail of this Skeleton Rider outfit, not so much because I really thought I could solve the mystery, as that I hated the fellow who made the offer."

"Then you weren't in earnest, over yonder?"

"Wait, please. Once the dust was posted, of course I had to make bluff toward winning the wager, and so I set out for this burg. But now—well, after what's happened so soon, reckon I'll wade in up to my lips, if I don't go in over head and ears!"

A reddish glow now filled Nesbitt's eyes, and his tones were intensely earnest as he spoke:

"Solve this mystery—capture or kill this devil who plays such infernal tricks—and I'll pay your own price without haggling!"

"That's generous enough, surely! And yet, may I ask a few questions in my turn, Mr. Nesbitt?"

A brief hesitation, then Castle nodded yes, and the owner of the Coupon Mine made answer:

"Go on, and if you ask only legitimate questions—"

"If I ask any others, of course you're at liberty to say as much, by saying nothing at all!" assured the Silver City representative. "To make a fair beginning, then, have I heard aright that all this ghost business comes of the Coupon Mine?"

"I believe so; yes," admitted Nesbitt.

"That's a starter, anyway. Now, shall I ask the questions, or would you prefer telling the story after your own fashion, Mr. Nesbitt?"

"What story?"

"That of the property now called the Coupon. Mind, sir, I've picked up a good deal about the case, over at Silver City, where men will talk, you know; so I know that what is now the Coupon was once the Lucky Strike, and that you were not the only man interested in the property in its earlier days. Now—I'm all ears open, sir!"

After a brief pause as though the more accurately to recall the past, Nesbitt abruptly began his condensed history of that mine.

"You heard it straight enough, far as you've said, Mr. Sheldon. The Coupon was first named the Lucky Strike, and others besides myself had an interest in the property before it was fairly developed."

"And those other parties have quit the business?"

"I am now the sole owner, if that is what you wish to learn," coldly answered the magnate, looking out through a window, just then. "I had firm faith in the Strike from the very start, and so I bought out all interests save one, at an early date. That one belonged to—a man named Martin White."

"He sold out, also, in the end?"

"Yes. I paid him his price, although that seemed out of all reason to those who held less perfect faith in the Strike than myself. And the sum was so much more than White ever thought of winning that—well, his good luck proved bad luck in the end, poor fellow!"

"Went on a holy tear, and broke his neck tumbling down a deserted shaft that same night," almost brutally explained Perry Castle.

"That was the way of it, sir," assured Nesbitt, in subdued tones. "The poor fellow never knew what hurt him, I don't reckon! Well, we gave him a more than decent burial, at all events."

"Broke his neck, eh? And no mistake about his being dead?"

"Not the slightest, sir; how could there be?"

Silver City Sam slowly shook his head, seemingly lost in reflection for nearly a minute; then he spoke up:

"That lets Martin White out, then! Of course he can't be cutting up all these didoes after being a corpse for so many years; but what's the matter with some other fellow trading on his reputation?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Who wants to buy the Coupon, first?"

The two men interchanged swift glances, plainly startled by that cool query, but Nesbitt evaded rather than answered the question.

"As far as that goes, Mr. Sheldon, no doubt many persons would be glad to invest in such a bonanza, always provided it was for sale to the highest bidder."

"And it is not for sale, then?"

"It is not for sale—no, sir!"

"A paying property, of course?"

"Yes! It pays even now, with all these drawbacks, and it would soon pan out a clean million if I could only free it from this devil who takes such fiendish delight in— Oh, I'll even up with him, some day!"

"Here's hoping you'll get your deserts, sir, devil or no devil!"

"I will! I swear I'll do all that, or I'll die trying!"

Fiercely spoke the mine-owner; but, ere he could add aught more, a violent blow was dealt the front door.

All three men leaped to their feet as by one impulse, then hurried across the room, Castle flinging the barrier open, to give vent to a low cry of angry alarm, for a square card was pinned fast to the door by a knife exactly like the one found rankling in the heart of Jonah Cain!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HIGH-ROLLER DETECTIVE DEMONSTRATES.

POSSIBLY because he was in another man's quarters, Silver City Sam was a trifle less prompt to take action than the others, but, while their eyes were mainly taken up with that door-attachment, his keen gaze was flashing out and around, searching for the author of that rude disturbance.

Not a little to his surprise he failed to sight a single person to whom that assault could be attributed; not a living being was in sight, save and except their three selves!

Nesbitt and Castle were swift to take the same thought, and they, too, betrayed great surprise at seeing none on whom they could fasten this deed.

"Who was it? Where's he gone so soon?" demanded the mine-owner, eyes sweeping around while right hand gripped the butt of a hidden weapon.

"The devil; if not, wouldn't we spot him?" half-superstitiously exploded the big henchman.

"It's worse than the devil—look!"

Nesbitt pointed at the door where showed another grim warning from the unknown enemy; a square of stiff paper bearing the impress of a black right hand, through the center of which was driven a crimson-stained knife, the exact counterpart of those already so noted in the annals of Gopher Slope!

"It's devil's work, surely, for no man could have got out of sight and hearing so mighty sudden!" persisted Castle, unusually pale and with a half-frightened light in his bold eyes.

Sheldon, the coolest and clearest witted of the trio, had been tasking his reasoning powers as well as his eyes during those fleeting moments.

Already he had begun to shape a theory, and after examining that placard, so significant in its meaning despite the lack of words, he spoke up:

"Not so much devil as devilish, I reckon, gentlemen! And—who is the owner of that building opposite?"

All eyes flashed across the unpaved street to the structure alluded to; an unpainted, uncouth affair of a single story with a square front, one door and two windows, all closed and the latter two boarded up.

"That place?"

"Yes. Who runs the shebang?"

"No one, now. It's empty; has been vacant for the better part of a year past," answered Nesbitt, seeming to rally in a goodly measure. "Why do you ask?"

"Wait a bit and maybe I'll tell you."

Drawing the revolver on which his right hand had rested ever since that rude salute came to the front door of the mine-owner's office, Silver City Sam quickly stepped over the way, assuring himself that the building was indeed vacated.

To all seeming it had remained undisturbed for a considerable length of time, but the door knob turned smoothly under his grasp, showing plainly enough that no rust had gathered there.

Passing around to the rear of the place, Sheldon made further examination, stooping low as he studied the soil about the back door; but through it all he made no remark which could cast any light upon his theory.

Nothing was seen or heard which could cast light over that mystery as far as Nesbitt and Castle were concerned, and as they silently followed the Silver City delegate back across the street, their faces betrayed as much.

Yet Sheldon was smiling as he gave that placarded door another brief scrutiny before facing the other men.

"Pretty well played, but it can't foolish a man with eyes open," was his address. "Of course you see how 'twas done, gentlemen?"

"Nor you, neither!" bluntly declared Castle.

"You don't want to risk any good money on that opinion, though, pardner, for you'd lose, to a dead moral," coolly asserted the delegate detective.

"You've found out something; what is it, man?"

"Just this: The fellow stole up here, stuck his notice on the door, then crossed over to give the alarm from that shebang," was the explanation, just as though the speaker had been an eye-witness to the whole performance.

"Talk's mighty cheap, but—"

"How do you know all this, sir?" asked Nesbitt, cutting his blunt follower short off.

"Simply by using my eyes and counting up what twice two makes. I believe I can make you see the same thing if you care to have me demonstrate, gentlemen."

"If you only can!"

"You shall be the judge, Mr. Nesbitt. Can you remember about how loud a sound was made? A right smart blow, wasn't it?"

"Certainly, but—"

"Good enough, sir! Now look at the knife. See for yourself that the point is little more than fast in the wood, not as it ought to be if sent home by a blow strong enough to make the noise we heard, in yonder."

"Am I right, so far, gentlemen?"

It really seemed so, for the weapon came away as Nesbitt touched the handle, showing but a slight dent in the pine door.

Deftly slipping off the placard from that stained blade, Silver City Sam stuck the weapon close to where it had first been seen, a simple and silent pressure of one hand proving amply sufficient to duplicate that dent.

Drawing the knife free he swung his hand back far enough to make a full, sweeping stroke, the sound of which by no means equaled that which had surprised them a few minutes earlier; yet the keen point of the bowie-knife was now visible on the other side of the panel!

"Now I reckon you begin to see what I'm driving at, gentlemen," the detective suggested. "The notice was stuck up here, then the rascal crossed over to have ready cover. From yonder he threw a stone to make you hear, then ducked inside the shebang, to run through and skip from the rear while we were sniffing on this side in hopes of detecting sulphur and brimstone!"

As he finished speaking, Sheldon moved quickly to one side, picking up a loose stone, then turned back to the door where he pointed out a fresh dent in the soft wood before adding:

"That caught my eye first, then the rest came easily enough, gentlemen. I don't wish to claim any extra credit, you see."

"It sounds reasonable enough, now, but—"

"It is reasonable enough, because it is the naked truth, Mr. Nesbitt. You would have been quick to smoke the trick, if you hadn't made up your mind in advance that there was some ghostly or spookish business about it all."

"If you knew it all—"

"Tisn't just this once, pardner, but a heap o' times," earnestly declared Perry Castle as his employer choked back the words which made so impulsive a start toward utterance. "And some o' those times you couldn't cipher it out so terrible easy as you 'pear to do this one!"

"That's my good luck in striking an easy one, first-off, isn't it?" came the light, careless reply. "Well, I only know what I've seen, of course, and that can be read running."

"You feel positive, then, Mr. Sheldon?"

"Just as I told you, sir. There's mighty little room left for doubt so far as this instance is concerned, and if this is a fair sample—"

"Call it that, and what do you make of it all?"

"Simply this: the devil hasn't anything to do with the matter, unless he fathers the shrewd knave who's playing such a bold hand."

"It's some keen, unscrupulous rascal, in all probability a fellow citizen of yours, and doubtless one whom you would the least suspect of running such a crooked deal."

Silver City Sam broke short off, for he saw Nesbitt give an involuntary start and look toward his henchman, while Perry Castle appeared fully as much taken aback.

"Hope I'm not treading on any tender corns, gentlemen?" blandly added the High-roller Detective, his keen blue eyes passing from face to face, then back again.

"No, but—"

"He's the devil, shore, boss!"

Sheldon laughed softly, a smile lighting up his comely face the while.

A rather equivocal compliment, this, yet still a compliment.

"Lacking horns, hoofs and forked tail! Well, gentlemen, you asked for my opinion, and right there you have it as best I can give."

"I never did take much stock in ghosts, and spooks, and devils on ten wheels, such as folks try to make out this dirty mix to be full of, and now I'm still less in favor of such a nonsensical theory."

"I'll stake what reputation I may have gained as a detective that this is the solid fact: some person right here in Gopher Slope—and one who figures in public as a far different manner of being, too!—is playing a bold game for high stakes."

"Since all the blows appear to be aimed in your direction, Mr. Nesbitt, or against those who have been interested in your property, the Coupon, it ought not to be so hard to guess just what manner of stakes are being played for, either."

Again the two men interchanged looks, and once again Silver City Sam saw as much and read their meaning correctly.

Perry Castle seemed on the point of speaking, but the mine-owner checked him with a swift gesture, meant to be hidden from the detective.

A cool, half-mocking smile showed itself upon that strong face, then the man from up-country spoke once more:

"That's all right, Mr. Nesbitt. I'm not asking you to trust until after you have tried."

"I never meant—but—"

"Of course not; why should you? As I started to say, no one would expect you to place full confidence in a stranger, like myself. I never looked for it, nor would I wish for it, either. Still, just this much:

"Now I've come this far, Mr. Nesbitt, I'm bound to get at the bottom of this mix, either as your man or on my own hook. You can take your choice, sir."

This was plain speaking, with a vengeance!

The mine-owner seemed a bit embarrassed, like one who hardly knows whether to regard that decision as favorable or as in opposition to his best interests.

"Step inside, please, and we'll talk it all over a bit more carefully, Mr. Sheldon," he said, after a brief silence. "Just now—"

"Beg your pardon, sir, but—who might yonder Sport be?"

Silver City Sam was looking down the street where, a couple of blocks distant, a well-dressed shape had just turned a corner, facing in their direction.

No one well-versed in the ways of Gopher Slope would have put such a question, simply because all within her gates knew that figure; but as a stranger, and a recent arrival, the High-Roller was excusable.

"Doc Brierly!"

"That? Hugh Brierly, of course," supplemented Nesbitt, after a swift glance in the direction indicated. "Why do you ask, pray?"

Silver City Sam took another keen look at that smoothly-moving shape, then quietly made reply:

"Well, sir, I hardly know why I felt such a strong curiosity just then, but—seriously—I fancy it's just such another cool and nervy Sport who is playing this risky game for the Coupon!"

"Didn't I say he was the devil, boss?" ejaculated Perry Castle.

CHAPTER XIV.

A PAIR OF NERVY SPORTS.

ABSALOM NESBITT seemed hardly less surprised than his henchman, although he did not give the emotion such free expression.

Turning once more toward his office, he spoke:

"Come inside, please, Mr. Sheldon. You and I surely ought to reach a more definite understanding about this business."

"Just as you say, not as I care, sir," indifferently acquiesced the High-roller, moving in the same direction; but with all his outward carelessness, Silver City Sam took time to pull that stained blade from the door, taking both it and the placard inside with him.

He placed both upon the round table which served the mine-owner as desk and catch-all, then took a seat where he could cover the entrance without exactly facing it.

The clear-sounding yet measured click of boot-heels was now distinctly audible, and as by common consent three pairs of eyes were turned toward that door.

A quick, light double rap sounded against a panel, then the knob was turned, the door swung open, and Hugh Brierly entered.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," he saluted, doffing hat and slipping gracefully into a chair which stood conveniently near. "Trust I'm not intruding, though?"

In spite of his suave tones and smiling face, all could see that this cool hand cared precious little whether he was intruding or not; but Absalom Nesbitt was too much man of the world to betray his real feelings, rising from his seat the better to perform his duty as host.

"Don't mention it, my dear sir. You're welcome as light, and—I believe you gentlemen saw each other out yonder by the bulletin-tree, but to my notion there's nothing equal to the good, old-fashioned 'knock-down'; so—Brierly, this is Mr. Sheldon, from Silver City; Mr. Sheldon, one of our best-known and most valuable citizens, Mr. Brierly."

The two men thus brought together rose to their feet with polite, even profound bows; but neither one offered a friendly hand, nor did either man stretch the truth far enough to express pleasure in forming an acquaintance.

As will sometimes happen, they were strongly antagonistic in nature, and both felt that instinctive aversion from the very first.

As he resumed his seat after this little ceremony, Silver City Sam extended an arm far enough to reach the articles which he had recently placed upon the table, gently twirling the knife between his fingers and

contriving to face the new-comer with that stamped placard.

Brierly could not help seeing this, and he smiled faintly, his well-kept mustaches curling a bit as the muscles contracted; but he made no remarks, asked no questions.

Cool and clear sounded his voice as he spoke to the mine-owner:

"I'll not detain you very long, Mr. Nesbitt, but—may I ask you a question or two?"

"Certainly; why not?"

"The death of Jonah Cain left a vacancy at the Coupon, I believe?"

"As superintendent, yes. Surely you read my advertisement at the bulletin-tree, yonder?"

"Yes. And I likewise heard Mr. Sheldon make application for the place," suavely spoke the Man of Chance, but without so much as glancing toward the person whose name crossed his lips. "Would it be too much to ask if you've hired him to serve as boss of the Coupon, Mr. Nesbitt?"

The mine-owner flushed a bit at this cool inquisitiveness, but then he spoke, rather sharply in his turn:

"No, sir, I haven't engaged him, as yet. May I ask what gives you such a deep interest in the matter, Mr. Brierly?"

"Oh, no particular interest, only—well, to be perfectly frank with you, Nesbitt, I'm mighty glad of it, for old-time's sake!"

"Why so? What do you mean, anyway, Brierly?"

"Well, don't you reckon 'twould be rather crowding the mourners to have two funerals of Coupon superintendents at or near the same hour?"

With an insolent drawl came these words, further pointing his meaning by a slight cast of his head toward the man from up-country who was listening with a faint smile playing about his mouth.

Nesbitt lost a bit of his high color at that, looking quickly from man to man, then almost harshly demanding:

"What do you mean by such talk, Doc Brierly?"

"Little old business, to be sure, Nesbitt," came the instant response, and at the same time the Sport cast aside his affectation of languor, dark eyes aglow and jaws squaring a bit more as he spoke on: "I'll say the rest directly to you, sir!"

He nodded toward Sheldon, then put on his hat as though to give the interview a less polite shading.

"Don't be at all bashful, my dear boy," coolly drawled the Silver City representative, with an almost ludicrous imitation of that discarded manner. "This isn't the first time in my experience that I felt obliged in common politeness to listen to—ahem!"

Nesbitt looked uneasy, and Perry Castle instinctively hitched his chair a little further from those rivals in coolness, more than half expecting a swift interchange of leaden compliments.

But his natural fears were a bit premature it seemed, since Brierly smiled blandly, one white hand gently caressing his mustaches as he spoke again:

"I need hardly say, my dear sir, that it grieves me dreadfully to crowd a stranger within our gates, but the way matters stand all around, I really don't see how I can avoid it."

"You have my hearty sympathy, Mr. Brierly."

"Thanks, awfully. Now—to cut a painful necessity short as may be—which would you rather do, Mr. Sheldon: apologize in public, or skip the town at an hour's notice?"

With an icy coolness which fairly stung came these words, Brierly smiling the while like one giving honey rather than gall.

Perry Castle now left his seat entirely, while Absalom Nesbitt gave a little exclamation of indignation at the insult thus placed upon the stranger in whom he was beginning to feel so powerful an interest.

"Drop that, Brierly!" the mine-owner cried, likewise rising to his feet; but ere he could say or do more, Silver City Sam quietly interposed.

"Pray don't worry, my dear sir. Did you ever know an ill conditioned fierce dog that wouldn't yelp at the heels of a stranger when it got a good chance?"

"Or fail to bite if a dirty hoof was lifted

to administer a kick?" swiftly supplemented the Man of Chance in even tones although his eyes now glowed like black balls coming to a red heat.

"Gentlemen, I beg of you!" cried Nesbitt, agitatedly, both hands rising as though to command the peace. "I'll have no rowing in here, and—ready to jump in, Castle!"

"There's no need of going quite that far, so far as I am concerned, Mr. Nesbitt," coldly declared the gambler. "I am simply a mouthpiece for the present, and until my friend has had his will, my hands are tied. As for Mr. Sheldon—

"He can answer for himself. Now—please put your proposition in plain terms once more, Mr. Brierly."

"I can do that in half a dozen words, sir: fight, apologize, or skip! Which alternative will you take?"

"Well, possibly that may depend on who presents the alternative," quietly retorted Silver City Sam, showing no shade of uneasiness. "Who is the other party so fortunate as to be dubbed your friend, pray?"

"Esau Gray. I imagine you will remember the person."

"If not, possibly I'd recognize him by my trade-mark," with a brief laugh which certainly seemed genuine.

"Jesting and horse-play will hardly pay your debts, Mr. Sheldon. In one word, Gopher Slope is all too small to contain both Esau Gray and yourself, so—apologize, fight, or get out of town in a hurry!"

"Is this a regular challenge, Mr. Brierly?"

"It is."

"Good enough, far as it goes, though you possibly might make matters just a trifle clearer without wearing all the moss off your tongue!"

"What more light do you desire, sir?"

"Heap sight, but to begin with: this duel is it to run along the chalk-line, or to be a sort of go as you please?"

"That part of the affair is left for your election. Take your own choice, but make it with your eyes open. After the word is once given, no change will be offered or accepted by our side."

The Sport spoke like solid business, now, and Silver City Sam apparently concluded to meet the emergency after the same fashion, for he took his own time about answering, seemingly weighing the matter well.

Presently he lifted his eyes, gazing keenly, curiously into that pale but by no means unhealthy looking face for a brief space before speaking.

"Well, sir, your decision?" asked Brierly, with a touch of irritation in his tones, at which Sheldon smiled.

"I was just wondering over the only thing that puzzles me, now."

"And that is?"

"Why you take such a powerful interest in trying to bounce me!" bluntly spoke the High-roller Detective. "How have I managed to step on your pet corns without knowing it, pardner?"

"You haven't stepped on them."

"Honest, now?"

"Square deal."

Silver City Sam drew a long breath as of relief, then spoke again:

"Well, sir, that takes a monstrous backload off my soul, for of course such a pretty, bandbox-y sort of gent like yourself wouldn't condescend to stoop so low as to lie about a mere trifle like that!"

"How well you know me!" sneered the gambler, in turn.

"Don't I, though? No corns bruised? Well, I'm glad of that, for—may I say it right out, Mr. Brierly?"

"Fire ahead and I'll try to stand it."

"Well, I'm glad, for I began to fancy you were the author of all this black hand and bloody knife business; I did, for a scandalous fact!"

CHAPTER XV.

SETTLING THE PRELIMINARIES.

CLEAR and distinct came those words, and both onlookers plainly expected hostilities to commence instantaneously; but instead of showing rage or hot resentment, Doc Brierly leaned back in his chair laughing softly yet heartily.

"Thanks, awfully, Samuel," he said, a moment later with a resumption of that pro-

voking drawl. "That wins my little bet for me, I reckon!"

"I want to know!"

"Yes. I told Esau Gray that you were more fool than knave, and this crazy fancy of yours proves me correct."

Perry Castle glanced quickly from one to the other, standing well out of the way, back to the wall, like one ready to dodge any stray bits of lead which might come on the loose.

Absalom Nesbitt seemed little less exercised over the unexpected "mix," for his florid face was beaded with sweat, and he looked very uncomfortable indeed.

Surely this was "fighting talk," yet weapons remained untouched, and smiles took the place of scowls so far.

Silver City Sam never flinched from that hot shot, but with his teeth showing in a cool smile, met that keen gaze in kind for a few seconds before making retort.

"You're in luck, Mr. Brierly, and surely ought to press the vein before it can peter out."

"Perhaps I may do just that, too."

"I would in your place. And so, just for luck, I'll give you a fair chance to double your winnings."

"How so?"

"You say you wagered that I was more fool than knave?"

"Yes. And I think you've won the stake for me."

"That's your good luck, then. Now, your own figures that I publicly prove you more knave than fool!" coolly offered the Silver City representative, smiling blandly the while.

To all outward seeming Brierly was equally as cool, for he "never turned a hair" at this thinly-veiled insult, though Nesbitt once more strove to command the peace.

"Gentlemen, I beg of you!"

"Don't worry, friend; it's peace so long as we're on neutral ground. As for Mr. Sheldon—"

"He's at your service, here, elsewhere, now or any other time," came the quick interposition.

"Thanks. Suppose we finish up one thing before beginning another?"

"Anything to do the agreeable, Mr. Brierly."

"You are so kind! Then—about this doubling my winnings. What limit as to time?"

"To the end of the month; how will that suit you, sir?"

"Charmingly, and I'll clinch the bet in due form if my friend Esau Gray doesn't lay you out for the cooling-board."

"If you care to speculate a trifle as to that, my dear sir?"

"Time enough when the preliminaries are fairly arranged. Now, your answer, please?"

"Is the silly coot really in earnest about challenging me to fight a duel, then?" asked Sheldon, in a tone of real or of admirably counterfeited surprise.

"So much in earnest that he'll begin shooting at sight unless you agree to give him a meeting on regulation lines, yes."

"So much the worse for Esau! Looks to me like his best hold was to get in his pretty work from under cover—striking a man from behind, in the dusk, for instance!"

"Am I to return this insult as your sole reply, Mr. Sheldon?"

"'Twould be nothing more than the naked truth if you did, Mr. Brierly," came the easy retort. "But I'll show greater grace, even if it isn't deserved."

"By which you mean—what?"

"That I'll accept his invitation to pistols and coffee for two, and do my little best to make it interesting for all concerned. I owe the fellow a bit of a lesson in good manners, anyway, and I might as well pay off the score before he hates himself to death."

"Don't forget that you are talking of my friend, sir," stiffly warned the Man of Chance. "Any insult offered him strikes me as well."

"I sincerely wish you a more reputable principal, next time, Mr. Brierly, but since I've agreed to overlook Esau Gray's failings, perhaps we'd better steer clear of that delicate point."

"I think so myself."

"How nice to agree even on a minor point like this, isn't it?" fairly cooed the High-roller. "Grant us time and opportunity and I verily believe we'd become thick as thieves, six in a bed with three in the middle, or—for instance—as inseparable as the Black Hand and Bloody Knife!"

A hot flush shot into that pale face, and all could see that Doc Brierly was fairly stung to the quick in spite of his wonderful nerve and admirable coolness.

As though content with so far gaining the point for which both had been playing so adroitly, Silver City Sam quickly added:

"But this isn't strictly business, so—will you act as my representative in this little affair, Mr. Castle?"

A flush of pleasurable surprise marked that bronzed countenance, but Perry made swift response:

"You bet I will, boss! Now—how far shall I go?"

"Oh, I'm one of the easiest men living to please, pardner. All I ask or expect is half a show for my entrance money. Just fall in with any arrangement Mr. Brierly sees fit to offer, and I'll do the rest."

For once in his life the Man of Chance seemed at a loss for quip or quirk, rising to his feet in silence, and bowing his way out of the office with Perry Castle for company.

A low, amused chuckle came from the detective's lips as the door closed behind the two seconds, and he turned with a smile to face the mine-owner, who certainly looked far less at ease, just then.

"I'm sorry it happened—just now, too!" muttered Nesbitt, frowningly. "I was beginning to take hope that we'd get at the bottom of this infernal mystery, but now—"

"What's to hinder your keeping right on with that hoping, sir?"

"Why, if you should— Confound it, sir! If anything should happen to you in this row, Doc Brierly would fairly laugh me out of town!"

"That would be lamentable indeed! But, take my word for it, sir, nothing is going to happen to me, from that particular source," quietly assured the High-roller, seemingly holding no fear as to the outcome.

"Don't you go into it with that notion, Sheldon," earnestly warned the other. Of course I'm not posted as to what you can do along that line, but Esau Gray is a marvel with the revolver, and if that weapon is selected—"

"I hope it may be."

"Then you can shoot a bit?"

"Just enough to not mistake one end of a gun for the other," came the laughing assurance. "That's sufficient, isn't it?"

Nesbitt frowned darkly, biting at his thick under lip after a fashion he had when puzzled or when matters were going contrary to his wishes.

"I wish I could feel half as confident as you appear to be, Sheldon, but I just can't! And as if Gray was not enough, here you had to cover Brierly all over with slurs and insults!"

"You're not resenting that because he's such a dear friend of yours, Mr. Nesbitt?"

"No, but—I say, Sheldon?"

"Well, sir?"

"That hint you flung out: surely you can't really suspect Brierly of being at the bottom of all this Black Hand business?"

Those words came as though the mine-owner found them particularly difficult to utter, but Silver City Sam made no allusion to that, his answer being ready and easy enough.

"No, I can't say that I do. A goodly part of all that wind was simply to hold my end level along the line he marked out at the start. He thought to bluff me down, and of course I couldn't afford to help him any. Understand?"

Nesbitt nodded his comprehension, yet seemed hardly satisfied with that combined denial and explanation.

"Then you don't think Brierly has aught to do with the affair?"

"Maybe, yes, maybe no; I'll not decide for good until I've had a better chance to probe the matter deeper, sir," was the grave response, all trace of levity vanishing from his face and voice.

"Remember I'm only a new-comer in Gopher Slope, and that I haven't had a

chance to even take a look around me, as yet. But of one thing you can rest assured: unless I'm wiped out before I can, I'll get at the bottom facts of this Death-watch business!"

There was a wistful light in his eyes, and something of the same to be read in the lines of his face, just then?

One would have said he felt powerfully tempted to confide fully in this bold stranger, yet was restrained by—what?

Silver City Sam was keen enough to read that expression aright, but he was far too shrewd to risk a repulse through himself betraying too strong an interest in the matter, and sat in calm silence like one who feels that he has made his meaning sufficiently clear for all purposes.

He saw that his words had not been wholly without the effect calculated upon, and waited for the seed to fairly take root.

Absalom Nesbitt shifted uneasily in his chair, several times parting lips as though about to speak, yet as often choking back the words which were almost ready to issue.

Then he abruptly blurted forth:

"If I only knew how far I could trust you, Sheldon!"

"From start to finish, if I do say it myself, sir."

CHAPTER XVI.

UPON THE FIELD OF HONOR.

BEFORE either man could say more, the sound of hasty footsteps drew near the front of the office, and after a sharp rap, the door swung open for Perry Castle to step over that threshold.

His face was all aglow, his dark eyes sparkling, and without waiting to be questioned, he blurted forth:

"It's all fixed up, boss! And if you don't take the starch out of that Esau, then I'll go kick my trousers all full of holes!"

"That would be more interesting to the spectators than to your honest self, Castle," smilingly spoke the detective, betraying no curiosity as to the arrangements made on his behalf.

"What have you agreed upon, first?" demanded Nesbitt, sharply.

"Guns, fifty yards to start with, fired at the word, or as soon after it as you take a notion, then go as you please until somebody can't go any further!" hurriedly explained the second, then drawing a long breath.

Nesbitt frowned darkly, making an impatient gesture while saying:

"It's wrong—all wrong! Why, Sheldon, it's rank murder!"

"Oh, I don't know," was the calm response. "It sounds worse than it really is, you see. There'll be no such mighty waste of ammunition, unless Esau proves himself such a sprinter that a bullet can't catch up with his heels."

Castle laughed in grim delight, and even the mine-owner had to smile a bit at that cool speech.

"I was thinking of you, Sheldon, not of Gray; except his sharp-shooting, which is something beyond the common."

"Is that so?"

"If he don't get the rattles! I know where my good money goes, and my good wishes keep it mighty close company, too!" declared Castle, his big paw coming out to clasp the ready member belonging to the Man from Silver City.

"That's hearty, pardner, and I'll see that you don't lose your good money, any more than your good wishes are wasted," frankly assured Sheldon; then adding in his former light, half-cynical vein: "I'm sorry for Esau, though!"

"You mean to down him, then?" asked Nesbitt.

"Well, I reckon he'll lose his birthright and not get to eat his mess of pottage, either!"

Perry Castle grew a bit more sober, now, for this confidence seemed just a trifle exaggerated to him, and it was with the best of motives that he cast forth a bit of warning.

"Of course we're pulling hard for you, pardner, but you don't want to go into this job with a notion that you've got a lead-pipe cinch. If he is nasty Esau's p'izen with a gun!"

"So much the better. There's little credit in worsting a novice."

"He looks mighty young, if not mighty innocent, does Esau; but he's made a record afore this, and a red one at that!"

Absalom Nesbitt had been fidgeting nervously through this interchange of words, but now he came to the front, his tones hardly as even and firm as they ordinarily were.

"I'm sorry—tenfold sorry that you've gotten into this scrape mainly through me and my interests, Mr. Sheldon. I wish I could see a fair way out of it without coming to burning powder!"

"Don't let that fact worry you, sir."

"But it does worry me, though! From what I've heard tell as well as seen myself, Gray is a very demon with the revolver! Now—I'm beginning to like you, Sheldon, and I'd hate awfully to see you downed the very first day of your coming to the Slope!"

Instead of showing a like uneasiness, Silver City Sam laughed lightly before saying:

"Don't you lay too many shekels on my falling, please! A fellow that's born to be hanged will never turn toes-up at crack of revolver, even when that same gun is manipulated by a demon, as you say!"

"Now, pardner," turning toward Castle, "when is the little circus to begin?"

"Right off, or just as soon as you can get a good ready, sir," came the answer, just a trifle dubiously, as though the speaker was hardly sure how his arrangement might suit.

"Better yet; I always did like to take a bit of pleasurable exercise before breakfast, and the mere thought of clipping Esau's claws stirs up my appetite!"

Possibly there was a goodly portion of "fanfaronade" in all this, but no man could have carried it off more perfectly than did the cool hand from up country.

He looked to his weapons, holding the hammers back far enough to twirl each cylinder across an open palm, thus making sure the tools were in good working order. Then he spoke again:

"I'm ready whenever you are, gentlemen. Of course I'm wholly in your hands, Castle, but maybe Mr. Nesbitt would like to see the sport?"

"I'm with you, of course," came the crisp decision.

"Good enough, and the fellow who'd ask more ought to tote a trough with him! Lead on, pardner, and we'll see how quickly we can salivate our worthless friend Esau!"

Leaving the office, the trio passed down the street, outwardly cool and composed, as though neither one of them entertained the faintest doubts as to everything coming their way.

This was policy, of course, since even so soon the tidings had spread throughout the town, and nearly every person glimpsed during that walk had faces turned toward the same quarter.

Where such affairs were brought off with an eye to business rather than to style or formality, little more remained to be explained, but that little was communicated by Perry Castle while on the route.

The affair was to come off not many rods beyond the bullet in-tree, which itself stood near the edge of Gopher Slope, on the south.

The principals were to take positions fifty yards apart, each armed with a brace of revolvers, "owner's choice," and were to be at liberty to fire after the word was given.

To pull trigger prematurely would be rewarded with a shot from the second on the other side; after the word was given, "everything went."

Silver City Sam failed to find aught to fault in this arrangement, not a little to the satisfaction of Perry Castle, and from that moment Sheldon had a firm backer and believer in the fellow whose broad chest bore bruises inflicted by his hard and heavy heels.

Although so few minutes had been cut to waste by the challenged side, they found the enemy before them upon the field of honor. Esau Gray had a little group of friends and cronies around him, but they were not dense enough to hide that ugly swelling on his jaw, at sight of which Silver City Sam smiled quizzically.

"Dollars to cents he'll shoot lop-sided, partner!" was his malicious whisper for the

benefit of Castle. "One thing, he's got to stand up, face to the front, for he couldn't sight around that lump if he tried!"

Doc Brierly was acting for Gray, and coming forward he doffed hat with a polite bow, both tone and manner in striking contrast to what they had been back in Nesbitt's office.

"I feel that I owe you an apology, Mr. Sheldon, for letting my friendship for Gray run away with my courtesy, over yonder," he began, suavely. "I'd really like to get out of taking such an active part against a stranger within our gates, but—"

"Don't mention it, I beg of you, my dear sir," genially interrupted the Silver City representative. "I'm just as sorry as you can be, although it may not be for precisely the same reason."

"Indeed! Might I ask what that reason is, without presuming too far on your good nature, Mr. Sheldon?"

"Why not?"

"Well?"

"Well, not to put too fine a point upon it, pardner, you're playing on the wrong side for a thoroughbred."

"Do you really think that way?"

"Or I wouldn't say it. You're a sport, I'm another. You're bucking against me, while I'm backing my own luck. I'm here to make or break, so—do you care about speculating?"

"If it will gratify you—we can't do too much for the dear friends who are about to be taken away from us! One hundred dollars that Gray downs you, then!"

Sharp and distinct came the last sentence, as though Doc Brierly wished all present to hear as well as to see.

A surge of spectators that way told how surely he was gaining his wishes, but just as clearly came a counter from the Silver City sport.

"I'll make you a present of fifty dollars to call the bet an even five hundred chucks, Mr. Brierly. What's the use in being a fellow unless you're a fell of a heller?"

Perry Castle gave a lusty whoop at this, sending his hat sailing high into the air, to be met with a tremendous kick as it came sailing down again.

"Will you hear to that, then?" he fairly howled in his glory. "He talks when he says something—he does!"

Brierly flushed a bit at that return blow, but he was of good metal and promptly proved as much.

"Are you in earnest making that offer, Mr. Sheldon?"

"Or I wouldn't be making it," coolly retorted the High-roller, pulling forth a fat wallet and tossing it across to Perry Castle. "he added: 'Money talks! Let your dust do the same, and we can save the rest of our breath for better use.'"

"You'll need all of yours, shortly, never fear!"

"Meaning that Esau will salivate me, of course?"

"Just that."

"Then prove your faith by your works. You represent me, please, pardner," to Castle. "Cover any and all bets offered on the general results, until you reach the bottom of my weasel."

"Which I've got a few solid chucks I wouldn't mind squandering the same way my own self!" declared Castle, enthusiastically.

"And if any more should be asked for, I shall be more than pleased to make up the deficiency," just a little pompously declared Absalom Nesbitt.

This seemed pointed at Doc Brierly, but if he heard the gambler gave no heed, being just then busily engaged in counting out the sum of ready money mentioned by the High roller.

Having said his little piece to his own liking, Silver City Sam drew a bit to one side, looking to his own guns for the last time, then coolly waiting for the moment of action.

This was not long delayed.

Betting was by no means rushing, the prompt offer of the mining magnate to back the stranger financially to any amount having bluffed off nearly all of those who might have felt like speculating.

Not a little to his own delight, Castle succeeded in getting up a neat little wad of

"dust" on "general results," and so was all the more ready to lend Sheldon what aid and support lay in his power.

All other preliminaries having been settled, a totally disinterested party was chosen to give the word for "the circus" to begin, then the principals were escorted to their respective stations by their seconds, after which Orin Constant called for attention, making his little speech as follows:

"Thar's no frills nor furbelows to tangle us all up, an' that's one good thing about this here business, everybody."

"You, gents, will hold your places an' your fire until I give the word, then you'll do the best ye know how. Now—all ready?"

Instant response came from both principals in the affirmative, and after a brief pause the veteran sharply called out:

"Ready? Git thar, Eli!"

CHAPTER XVII.

SILVER CITY SAM'S SHARP WORK.

ALMOST before that signal was fairly clear of the veteran referee's lips Esau Gray brought up his right arm and fired a snapshot at his adversary, who went down as though struck by lightning!

A gasping sound broke from the intensely-interested crowd which had gathered to see the sport, for nearly every one of them believed the fight was ended almost ere it had fairly begun.

Perry Castle gave a curse of fierce dismay, but before he could take positive action, another change took place in the situation.

Silver City Sam had dropped face downward, just as a man does when shot through the brain, but the High-roller was very far from being a fit candidate for "a high lot on the hillside."

With another movement fully as swift as had been that dodge to cheat the coming shot, he raised himself upon both elbows, hands gripping revolver-butt, blue eyes glancing keenly through the double sights for a quick yet marvelously steady shot at the prematurely exulting duelist near the further end of those lists.

With a fierce cry of vindictive triumph Esau Gray lowered his pistol hand, springing forward to lessen the space and thus render it easy to send home a finishing shot; but as he saw that sudden lifting of his enemy's head and shoulders, he changed his cry for one of mingled rage and chagrin, jerking up his weapon to—

His pistol exploded, but the shot lacked an aim!

Coolly and surely as though firing at an inanimate target where nothing of slightest worth was at stake, the High-roller Detective sent one bullet true to his will, causing the gambler to reel back and aside in crippled condition, pistol falling from that unnerved grip.

Squarely through the elbow joint crashed that pellet of lead, and as his arm dropped, the horrible grating of shattered bones against each other wrung a cry of exquisite agony from the pale lips of Esau Gray.

"Your arm's in the way, pardner!" clearly called out the Silver City Sport, as he drew trigger, then adding as he turned to the left far enough to make one elbow lend his upper person support: "Didn't I tell you so, clumsy?"

Across his leveled gun passed those words, but then, as he knew his lead had not gone astray and his adversary was hard hit, the High-roller sprang to his feet and sternly shouted:

"Back, all hands! This was to be to the finish, and— Beg, you treacherous cur! Holler enough, I say, or I'll fill you so full of holes you'd rept out for a skimmer!"

That voice seemed to fill Gray with fury, and instead of asking for mercy, he poured forth a flood of vicious curses, at the same time grasping his second revolver with his left hand.

"Easy, you crazy idiot!" cried the High-roller, in swift warning. "I don't want to killy ou, Esau, but— Flap that ear of yours, pardner!"

Again came one of his wondrously-quick shots, and with a hoarse cry Gray jerked head to one side, blood showing where that missile had fairly clipped one of his prominent auricles.

"That's what you get by playing the hog, Esau!" declared Sheldon, stepping swiftly aside far enough to clear the little smoke-cloud, holding his weapon ready for further use in case it should be required. "You are my porker, by that mark, and— Beg, you cur!"

"Don't shoot—I've got enough, curse ye!" hoarsely cried the defeated duelist, shrinking away from that coolly menacing front.

That he had "sand" in more than fair quantity Esau Gray had proven on more than one occasion, but never until now had he come into collision with a master of the gun who likewise had the proper amount of nerve to make the combination complete.

That crippling shot might well have been luck, but this mutilating addition was surely skill; and disabled as he now was, to stand out longer against such heavy odds would be suicidal.

Silver City Sam showed no surprise or elation at that surly submission, seeming to take it as a matter of course, turning from the disabled duelist without a lingering glance to handle his guns after a significant fashion as he flashed a comprehensive glance over that assemblage before calling forth in clear, cool tones:

"Who asks for the next dose? Don't be backward about coming forward, gentlemen, and don't hesitate about asking for what you want if you can see it in stock!"

"You'll never have a sweeter chance, though you live to be your own grandfather, gentlemen! This is my day for fun and frolic; to-morrow I'll be little old business once more, when I wouldn't mix in a muss for anything less than sure death and sudden burial!"

"Step to the front if you want to trample all over my pet corns, or else I'll take it for granted that I've won my right to walk your streets and inhale my share of your smoke and dust without having to fight for it at every corner and crossing. Now—is the performance over, gentlemen, or has the circus barely begun?"

Glibly enough all this was rattled off while facing the crowd, guns cocked and muzzles resting easily against his shoulders as his arms were bent upward; but no acceptance came in haste, and Perry Castle was the first man to make reply of any sort.

"Don't you think thar is sech a hog, boss, but if there is—well, right here's a clown fer to back up your ringmastering—and that's what's biting Perry Castle!"

Kicking his hat faraway in his enthusiasm, the big fellow strode out to the side of his new hero, guns in hand, ready to fight the entire town if need be.

A fairly general cheer greeted this action, and it was very evident that the tide of popular favor had turned toward the Silver City delegate; which possibly accounts for the action taken by the Man of Chance.

It goes without saying that Doc Brierly hoped to win his bet by the complete victory of his principal, but when he saw Esau Gray so utterly outclassed, very little of the keen chagrin he surely felt was permitted to show itself in face or in manner.

And now, when nearly every one else seemed to be cheering the victor in that off-hand tilt with guns, the gambler forced an easy smile and stepped up to the High-roller, doffing hat in an apologetic bow as he spoke:

"Allow me to congratulate you, Mr. Sheldon. Next to winning a bet is the pleasure of losing one's cash to a man of your caliber."

"You are satisfied, then, Mr. Brierly?"

"If not, I'd be what you called Esau a bit ago," came the half-laughing response. "The money is yours, sir, and I'll consider it a cheap bargain if I may call you my friend in return?"

Just a bit of extra color showed in the other's face at this smoothly adroit speech, the perfect sincerity of which he more than doubted, but which he could hardly afford to reject, just then.

In no other manner did he betray this skepticism, and with hardly less perfect policy he made swift response:

"You're too awfully kind, my dear sir, but—I'm always ready to prove a friend to

my friends, to give honest palm to hearty grip, or—to pay back dirt for dirt!"

With a frank, easy laugh the gambler extended his white hand, which was instantly grasped by Silver City Sam. And as the two sports stood thus, face to face, palm to palm, another united cheer burst from the lungs of that interested assembly.

Catching quickly at the excuse thus offered, Sheldon dropped that hand to lift his hat in response, bowing gracefully this way and that, while Doc Brierly hastened over to where Esau Gray was being supported by Jack Ellison and another crony or two.

"You do me proud, gentlemen, all," acknowledged the Silver City Sport, as he bowed, hand over heart for a few moments, then shifting to a less romantic but still important part of his internal economy as he added:

"I'm used to a bit of exercise before breakfast, as a usual thing, but too much is more than a plenty, and my poor stomach is crying out that I've gone dead back on it! So—ta-ta, gentlemen, and I'll see you all later if the kind fates are willing!"

Bowing afresh to the cheers which greeted his bit of a speech, Silver City Sam put his hat back in place, took a look to see that his defeated rival was safely in the hands of his friends, then turned to the right about and moved briskly away in the direction of his hotel, seemingly without thought for his recent backers in that little game of powder and lead.

Neither Absalom Nesbitt nor Perry Castle took any active steps to change this determination, and the new "chief" won his way clear of the crowd without delay or interruption.

Showing no outward traces of the ordeal through which he had passed since making that early arising, Sheldon found his way back to the Carbonate, where he had already secured quarters, and where the morning meal was awaiting the unusually dilatory "feeders."

The High-roller was nearly the first man to present himself at table, although he was quickly followed by a number of citizens who had been eye-witnesses to that quickly-arranged meeting, and who had followed close upon the heels of the "rising sun."

Paying not the slightest attention to the admiring looks which were freely turned his way, nor seeming to hear the audible whispers and various comments which were passing to and fro on all sides, Samuel ate of the viands placed before him with hearty appetite.

That little collision certainly had not unsettled his stomach, nor rendered him a more profitable boarder so far as eating was concerned.

But fantastic fortune had not entirely done with the delegate from up-country, and another surprise was preparing for him, beside which that invitation to a select shooting-match was as mole-hill to mountain.

With a broad grin stretching his greasy visage, the slipshod waiter approached the side-table at which Silver City Sam was seated, offering him a sealed note, at the same time volunteering the information:

"A angel done sent it, boss, or I'm no judge o' style an' beauty!"

Sheldon tore open the cover, glanced at the signature, to flush hotly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SAMUEL FILLS A DOUBLE ROLE.

"SHELL I tote the answer back, boss?" asked the waiter, with a still broader grin as he stood confidentially by. "Young leddy's in thar: the parlor, which is—Yes, sir?"

"Thanks. No answer is required," coolly interrupted the High-roller, pocketing the note and easily flipping a coin for that ready palm.

He played the part well, but under that surface coolness lay an unusual heat, while his pulse was beating far more rapidly than it had done when he faced the deadly weapons of Esau Gray.

Yet that bit of scented paper had not contained so very much: only a couple of lines, with the addition of a name—the name of Avis White.

Silver City Sam turned again to his breakfast, eating much as before, seemingly so cool and unconcerned that the rather ro-

mantic if dirty and greasy waiter shuffled away in disappointment, his dreams of a love-chase going up in smoke.

But Sheldon did not linger much longer at table, rising and quickly passing out of the long dining room with an unusual sparkle in his blue eyes until—Surely that was Absalom Nesbitt?

The mining magnate was just in the act of opening a door near the further end of that long, narrow passage, and Sheldon could almost have taken oath that Nesbitt moved a bit swifter because of glimpsing himself at the dining-room door.

"What's he up to, now?" mentally asked the High-roller, pausing for a brief space, then fixing eyes upon another door half-way between. "Is he playing spy on me, or—over her actions?"

A dark frown bore this query company, and a far from pleasant expression marred that comely visage; but only for a few seconds.

Then a grim smile took its place, and with a little nod of his head, Silver City Sam advanced to that nearest door, pausing to give a gentle tap on the panels by way of warning before turning the knob.

Heswung the door open and entered, quickly swinging the barrier to behind himself like one wishing to cut off all view from without.

This was "the parlor," as Sheldon felt assured would prove to be the case, from past experience with similar hotels in the "wild and woolly West," and, too, here he beheld the fair author of the note whose reception had set his pulse to beating with such undue vigor.

It was the young lady passenger whose name and queries had so startled Absalom Nesbitt, the evening before, and as she rose to her feet at that entrance, one could have sworn this was not her first interview with the High-roller, by many!

Her hands were extended, her face was filled with an eager if not loving light; but instead of springing forward to take hands or form in friendly or lovely clasp, Sheldon stood still, one finger lifted to cross his lips in silent warning!

I reckon that pesky hash-slinger made a blunder, ma'am," the High-roller said, speaking distinctly, as a man will when he has no thought of concealing his speech or his thoughts.

A look of mingled surprise and mortification came into the face of Avis White at this unexpected reception, and once again Sheldon made that cautionary sign, at the same time nodding head toward the closed door back of the maiden, which evidently communicated with the room into which Absalom Nesbitt had passed, but a few seconds earlier.

"The fool fellow said you wanted a word with me, ma'am, and though I felt pretty certain he'd got things in a mux, 'twasn't so mighty much trouble that I couldn't come myself to explain and apologize, all in a bunch."

While speaking thus in his former tones, Silver City Sam closed the hall door and advanced, whispering swiftly and guardedly as he did so:

"On guard! Enemy listening in yonder. Follow my lead, and play we're strangers!"

That fair face flushed hotly, then grew pale again at that warning, the full force of which Avis appeared to feel through instinct.

She nodded her comprehension, and as that keen light flashed into her dark eyes, Sheldon knew that she would play her part without error from that moment on.

"Your name is Mr. Sheldon, I believe, sir?" asked Avis, her tones low and peculiarly distinct just then.

"Yes, ma'am, but—"

"Then I am the one in fault, if any person, sir, for the waiter simply did my bidding. Will you be seated, Mr. Sheldon?"

Silver City Sam had passed by the maiden, and now stood with back to the closed door beyond which he felt morally sure the mine-owner was just then straining his ears to the utmost, and with hands thus hidden from a possible eye at key-hole, he was swiftly writing with pencil on paper.

"Yours to command, if I can serve you in any way, ma'am," the High-roller said, at the same time deftly slipping that bit of paper into her ready hand.

Avis covertly glanced at the writing thereon, reading:

"Absalom Nesbitt just gone in room adjoining. Believe he's watching and listening. Play you want to hire me about mining investments. Don't say aught he can kick at. Explain later on."

"You see, ma'am, being a stranger, like, I reckoned the hash-slinger jumped the wrong claim, although he had the name pat enough," glibly rattled on the detective, to cover that reading and prevent the possible eavesdropper from having still more dangerous suspicions awakened.

"But I'm the happiest fellow you ever caught out of jail when I see even half a chance to do a favor for one of the fair sex. And that means I'm yours to command, from start to finish, unless—well of course a fellow can't do two things all at once, no matter how willing his heart may be!"

"Thanks, Mr. Sheldon," said Avis, crumpling that note of warning up in small compass, and slipping it deftly out of sight and danger of discovery by any other hand. "I trust you can see your way clear to serve me, but of course I expect to pay for your time and trouble."

"Don't mention it, ma'am."

"Thanks. I have some ready money which lacks a paying investment, Mr. Sheldon, and I thought seriously of putting it into mining property. Can you give me any advice on that point, sir?"

"Now, ma'am, 'twas something pretty much like that I was afraid of, from the very first!" declared the High-roller, with disappointment fairly bubbling out at every syllable.

"I hardly comprehend your meaning, sir?"

"Now, if 'twas only up-country, ma'am! But down here—I'm a clean stranger, myself, and though I might take a flyer or two on my own account, I'd hardly care about risking other people's money."

"A stranger in Gopher Slope, sir?" echoed Avis, as though amazed.

"I hit the town for the first time only last night, although I reckon I'm tolerably safe in saying that I've begun a sort of acquaintance with some of the sports this morning before breakfast," was the dry reply, followed by a chuckling laugh natural enough to deceive even so keen a hand as Absalom Nesbitt.

"Really, sir, I was under the impression that you were what is called an 'old resident,' else I might not have— But if you would risk an investment on your own account, surely you could exercise the same good judgment in behalf of an employer?"

Sheldon cleared his throat after an embarrassed fashion, apparently something at a loss for an answer; but then he made reply:

"Of course I might do all that, ma'am, only for— The fact of the case is pretty much like this: I'm hardly my own man, you see."

"By which I am to understand?"

"That another fellow's got a sort of option on my services," was the swift and distinct explanation. "Of course, if he don't come to time or don't care to engage me, that's different. If he should— Well now, Miss White, seems to me you couldn't do better than to ask his advice."

"Whom do you mean, Mr. Sheldon?"

"Absalom Nesbitt," was the answer, accompanied by another hidden sign of caution. "He's owner of the Coupon, and a whole swarm of lesser bonanzas, and there isn't a man in seventeen States that's better posted in mines and mining properties than that very gentleman!"

"Indeed."

"For a fact, ma'am, or I wouldn't be telling it to you."

"If he has so great interests of his own, Mr. Nesbitt would hardly think it worth while to trouble himself with my small investment."

"That may be, too, although I don't think it," earnestly added the High-roller, at the same time writing another note under cover. "The boss is clean white, and sharp as a cambric needle! And if he's too busy to do the work himself, I'll go bail he'll direct you to another who'll serve your interests just as sure as he could himself; and more than that is needless!"

"You speak enthusiastically, sir. You

have great faith in this Mr. Nesbitt, evidently?"

"Well, I have, although I haven't known him so mighty long. But he's one of the sort that makes his mark in a hurry: just hits or misses, clean. And me—I'm hit, and don't mind saying so, in confidence."

Meanwhile, these are the words traced by that busy pencil:

"Too risky to meet or talk in town. Please go out for stroll this afternoon, east of town. Go alone, keep on until I can join without risk of being seen. Can explain more fully, then."

Rising to his feet and deftly leaving that note on the vacated chair, a significant glance calling her attention to it, Sheldon took his leave, reiterating his advice that she consult Absalom Nesbitt before investing her money in property of any description.

"I will think the matter over, Mr. Sheldon, and whether I follow the advice given or not, shall ever feel grateful to you for giving it. Pray pardon me for troubling you?"

"Don't mention it, ma'am; it cost me nothing!" was the gallant response, then the High-roller left the parlor and proceeded directly up-stairs to his chamber, unlocking it with a key taken from his pocket.

Yet it was evident some person had been there during his absence, for there, showing distinct against his pillow, was the Black Hand and Bloody Knife!

CHAPTER XIX.

SILVER CITY SAM HIRES OUT.

THE High-roller Detective stopped short, flashing a keen glance around the chamber, hand on ready revolver; but he made no further move toward drawing the weapon.

There was no one in the room save himself, and absolutely no place where one could hide, save under the narrow bed.

That same glance showed Sheldon no person had sought concealment there, although it was just as certain that the chamber had been invaded since his early departure.

The lower sash of the one window was lifted, just as Silver City Sam had left it, and crossing the room, the detective looked out.

Several persons were within sight from there, but none of them acting after a suspicious manner, so far as he could tell.

Looking out and downward, he saw no appliance by means of which the bold intruder could have mounted to his chamber from the outside, while the hard, dry ground bore no trace of unusual treatment.

"Picklock or window-climber!" muttered the detective, as a result of his brief but fairly thorough investigations. "The first for choice, for even a Death-watch would hardly risk being caught playing burglar under the rising sun!"

Turning away from the window, Silver City Sam gazed upon the grim warning which undoubtedly had been prepared for his especial benefit.

A single pillow lay in place at the head of that narrow couch, and upon that pillow lay a square of white paper, the middle of which bore the imprint of the Sable Hand.

That print was knife-pierced, the steel driven through the pillow as though by a vengeful arm, the black and red showing in strong contrast against the white background.

In all respects it was a duplicate of the warning pinned fast to the office-door of Absalom Nesbitt that same morning. Here, as there, no words supplemented that grim warning, nor was any such addition needed.

This was the fourth knife seen by Sheldon since coming into the Gopher Slope district, complete duplicates of each other, even to that realistic stain which so closely resembled freshly-shed human blood.

As he reached this conclusion, the High-roller smiled faintly.

"There'd ought to be good money in the cutlery trade out here! Wonder if that isn't a clue worth following up a bit closer, though?"

He pulled the weapon free, gave it a careful examination, noting the trademark and

makers, then wiped the steel and slipped it into his belt, behind, out of sight.

"Maybe some fool will try to jump me for the original Bloody Knife if this is caught on my person, but reckon I'll take my chances. 'Twon't do any harm to match the specimen down at Nesbitt's, anyway, if no good."

Seating himself on the edge of the bed, Sheldon fell into deep and busy reflection, that warning figuring in part as thought-food.

Evidently he was being classed as among the Couponites, for the two warnings posted that morning were precisely alike, and in all probability that posting was the work of the same bold hand.

Who could that be?

Certainly not Doc Brierly, Esau Gray or Jack Ellison, for one and all of them could be fairly accounted for. Then—where else to look?

"Some one who hangs out in town, evidently, yet that don't narrow the choice very much!" was his swift reflection. "Well, the third time is said to be the charm, and if that is true, and this gay buck keeps up the same lick he's started off with we'll have another sort of circus for the fun-loving citizens ere long."

Putting that thought aside for the time being, Silver City Sam let his fancy take a bit wider range, running over all the incidents which had kept him so busy since his coming into the Slope district.

He recalled the shock received when he first realized what had happened to Jonah Cain.

A complete stranger in life, of course, yet it still made his pulse bound a bit more quickly as he remembered calling to that motionless shape, only to an instant later see what dread work had been done to it.

"The work of a veritable demon, surely! And yet—would such a demon both save and spare me, to tell what I'd seen and heard?"

Again he could hear the deep tones of the Skeleton Rider, could in fancy see those strangely illuminated bones.

If his had been the death-dealing hand in Cain's case, why had it been so tempered with mercy but a few minutes later?

If not the secret slayer, who was playing upon his uncanny reputation as Death-watch?

"It's all an infernal mix-up, but I'll get to the bottom of it if I live through the rest of this month!" vowed the High roller Detective, in tones barely audible to his own ears.

Then his thoughts passed on to what had taken place that morning, and again a dark frown wrinkled his high brows as he recalled the half-stealthy manner in which the mining magnate had slipped into the room adjoining the hotel parlor.

"What was he after, there? Surely he couldn't know that Avis was sending for me, or that we— Wonder just how much the old villain has guessed at, anyway?"

Evidently that was a far from comfortable thought, for the High-roller sat on his bed, staring at vacancy, almost viciously tugging at his mustaches the while.

How could Nesbitt have divined that an acquaintance existed between the young couple?

Was it purely chance that led him to the hotel in time to eavesdrop that early interview?

"And that's just what the old villain did, for I could catch his breathing at the key-hole!" muttered Sheldon. "How much did he see? Wonder if he caught me making signs to put the little woman on her guard, first-off? If so—well, I'd surely ought to be able to match him card for card, play for play, even on equal terms!"

Reaching this conclusion seemingly satisfied the High-roller, for the time being, since he rose abruptly to his feet, giving himself a vigorous stretch, then looking to his weapons like a man who feels a possibility of being called upon to burn powder in a hurry.

Leaving the chamber, locking the door after himself, Sheldon leisurely descended the stairs and entered the office, where he left his key for safe keeping.

The landlord gave him a more than respectful greeting, showing past all doubt what a favorable account he had recently received concerning this new "chief."

Buying a couple of cigars and lighting one of them, Sheldon left the hotel as though for a lazy stroll through town.

Silver City Sam was well enough versed in western life to know that a certain degree of interest would cling about him as victor in that duel, and that his remaining in seclusion would only add to rather than detract from that morbid curiosity.

For reasons perfectly satisfactory to himself, then, the High-roller decided to give all an opportunity to both view and discuss him while he had no especial mission on hand; later it might prove far more inconvenient.

Seemingly ignorant of all those looks and comments being made by the citizens he chanced to come within eye-range of, Sheldon leisurely strolled through the town, presently drawing near its eastern edge to send a keen, searching look over that quarter.

Knowing that the stage-road entered from the north, while the bulletin-tree stood south, Samuel had named that direction at random while making an appointment with Avis White.

After all, he could hardly have made a better choice, for the ground in that direction was only pleasantly broken, while affording an abundance of cover for those who had good reasons for secrecy in their meeting by daylight.

Having settled this point to his satisfaction, Sheldon veered around, and as though guided simply by chance, turned his steps toward the office bearing Absalom Nesbitt's name and business on its front.

He was about to pass this by without stopping, like one who hardly recognized his locality, when the mining magnate gave a hasty call from his den, following voice to door, and checking the High-roller with an added gesture.

"Hello! I wasn't thinking when I— All right, Mr. Nesbitt!"

Turning back with the air of a man who would as soon spend a few idle minutes there as elsewhere, Sheldon once again crossed that threshold and sunk easily into a chair near the littered table-desk.

"Just been taking a view of the Slope, and— Business, is it?"

His tone changed abruptly as he caught that gesture, and his quick wit was complimented by a smile from the mine-owner.

"Business first, pleasure after, yes. Now—you haven't been scared out of the notion of taking a job under me, I trust, Sheldon?"

"Well, not scared too badly to relish my breakfast, anyway," with a short, careless chuckle. "But as for the rest—I didn't know you'd made me an offer of a job, sir."

"Consider it made now," came the quick reply. "Will you take the place, and run it for all it's worth?"

"Meaning the Coupon superintendency, of course?"

"Of course. Will you take the job?"

Sheldon was in no particular hurry to answer, softly drumming on the table with nimble fingers, staring across at the dingy wall, seemingly weighing the chances for and against the proposition.

"Well, sir, that isn't so mighty easy to answer," he said, presently. "From what's happened since I came within cannon-range of the Slope, yesterday, looks like taking such a job means heap risk and little profit!"

"As for the risk, a man of your caliber isn't used to counting that in advance. As for the profit—name your terms, Mr. Sheldon!"

"All right, sir. I can do the last, easy enough, and if you should think I was hitting your bank-roll too heavily, no harm done on either side. For it's no more than fair to give you the hint, sir: I've got a second string to my bow if I choose to pull it."

"Another job, you mean?"

"Yes; and one with a heap sight less risk attached to it, too!"

"Please name your figures, Mr. Sheldon," coldly repeated the mining magnate, with a slight frown wrinkling his forehead.

"First, what work do you expect me to do if I hire out as your man? Nothing like understanding all these minor points in advance, you see!"

"I wish you to act as superintendent of

the Coupon; to boss the hands, see that they earn the wages to be paid them, make the property pay the highest possible returns, and in general such duties as belong to the position.

"In addition to this, I expect you to do all you can to further my interests, and to confound my enemies. And, above all else, out-devil this infernal Death-watch!"

Absalom Nesbitt spoke rapidly yet coolly, after the manner of a man of business who had given the subject all necessary thought.

Silver City Sam listened closely, giving a bit of a whistle as the long list reached its ending.

"Quite a programme you've worked out, Mr. Nesbitt, but I'm willing to try it on if I'm paid enough for the work."

"How much do you wish to be paid, then?"

A brief pause as though counting up the items, then Silver City Sam coolly made reply.

"Five hundred per month and found, if I make a successful stagger at it; nothing at all if I pan out a fraud or make a fizzle."

If he expected to stagger the mine-owner, Sheldon was disappointed, for a plump hand reached out to clasp his while Nesbitt said:

"Agreed, sir, and we'll date the contract from to-day!"

"Good enough! Now tell me a little more about the situation, sir."

CHAPTER XX.

A PEEP BEHIND THE SCENES.

It was well along in the afternoon of that same day when Silver City Sam left the hotel in order to keep the appointment he had made with Avis White.

They had only caught a passing glance of each other since their brief interview of that morning, and that under the keen if not actually suspicious eyes of Absalom Nesbitt.

The two men were just entering the dining-room of the Carbonate Hotel, a bit late for the mid-day meal, when Miss White was taking her departure.

They uncovered, both bowed and stepped aside for her passage. Miss White stole a swift glance at one or the other of them, and received one in return from the handsome High-roller; a look which plainly told her their appointment still stood as arranged.

Neither men mentioned the young lady during the meal, and as Sheldon was not to report for regular work until the day following, it was easy enough to shake off this, his new employer.

Leaving the hotel behind him, Silver City Sam strolled lazily away, taking a generally northern course and leaving the town by way of the regular stage road.

That was natural enough, and hardly sufficient to awaken curiosity or give rise to comments among those who happened to witness his movements.

He had entered town by that route, and what more natural than that he should set face in that same direction when taking an idle stroll?

But Sheldon only kept to the road long enough to get out of sight of the town-people, then worked his way around to the east, keeping well covered by the friendly rocks and scrubby pines.

Not until he won a location from whence he could readily command a view from that edge of the Slope, and without difficulty mark the progress of any person who came from that quarter, did Sheldon come to a halt.

It was yet rather early to expect Miss White, but he was willing to wait for that coming, since he felt certain of his reward in the end.

The detective's brain was hardly given rest during that interval of waiting, for he surely had ample food for thought.

Had he acted all for the best in accepting place under Absalom Nesbitt? Would he be able to do his work thoroughly while so hampered, or would filling that place give him an even better opportunity for carrying out the stern resolve he had made?

Those doubts were not entirely dissipated when Sheldon first sighted the figure of a woman emerging from town and coming in that direction, but now he had no room for reasoning after that fashion.

His face showed far more than an ordinary interest in that gracefully moving figure, and

his blue eyes filled with a vivid light which certainly was not hatred or distaste!

"She's coming, bless the little woman! What brought her over here in such haste, though? I never dreamed of such a thing, and when I saw her signature—Steady, Samuel!"

The High-roller cut his musings short, but watched that slowly advancing shape the more closely, admiring each curve and bend as Avis picked her way through the rocks and broken ground.

She acted very naturally, too, moving as though merely out for a pleasure walk, with no positive end in view, yet keeping steadily to the line marked out by the man from Silver City.

Pausing sufficiently long to assure himself the maiden was not being followed from town by either enemy or self-invited admirer, Sheldon shifted his own location, the more quickly to meet his fair friend.

That meeting was a sufficiently cordial one, yet it could hardly be termed that of lovers; or, if lovers, hardly that of an engaged couple.

There was a charming blush upon her cheeks, and a half-shy light in her dark eyes, but Avis gave her hand as one meets a good friend—nothing more, nothing less.

Sheldon was just a trifle less reserved, taking that dainty paw between both of his strong hands, holding it with earnest pressure while swiftly speaking:

"I wasn't quite sure you'd understand my acting after that queer fashion, my good friend, but what else could I do?"

"There was no mistake, then? That man was actually playing spy?"

"He surely was in the room lying just back of the parlor, and I am fairly certain I could hear him breathing as he stooped or knelt at the keyhole."

"The villain! What could he mean by such conduct?"

"Well, I fancy that isn't a patching to what Absalom Nesbitt is capable of, on a pinch," rather grimly said the detective, as that hand was withdrawn from his charge. "If you really knew the fellow—"

"I have heard of him, Sam, and that is mainly why I'm here now, instead of at Silver City."

"I could hardly trust my eyes when I recognized your handwriting, Avis, but—I'm not trying to penetrate your secrets, mind, little lady!"

"Of course I intended telling you all about it, Sam, and so—Ugh! how I do hate the sight of that great, fat, spidery villain!"

"A spider who can spin all his webs of pure gold, though, Avis!"

"Of gold how won?" came the swift retort. "Do you know, Sam, I fully believe that Absalom Nesbitt murdered my poor, poor father!"

"Avis, dear friend!"

"It is true, Sam! I heard some men talking about him, and the Coupon Mine, and how he came to get hold of it through cheating or—well, I just couldn't catch that part of it, you know, but the men went on to say an awful lot about the Death-watch who kept guard over what used to be the Lucky Strike—my father's mine, Sam!"

Avis was too greatly agitated now to make a very lucid explanation, but thanks to his own knowledge of the matter Sheldon found no difficulty in getting at her full meaning.

She had heard talk about the strange doings here at Gopher Slope, and rather romantically twisted them to more nearly meet her own wishes.

"I thought that it might be my poor father—driven mad, perhaps, by his terrible wrongs, or his sufferings—and something told me not to lose an hour, but to come on here at once! And—and—oh, Sam! if that awful mystery should envelop my father!"

"I hardly think that can be possible, Avis, dear," Sheldon said, his arm stealing protectingly around the waist of the agitated maiden in a more than platonic fashion; but Avis made no objection, possibly being too much disturbed to recognize the impropriety!

"I know, but—if it should be so! If poor father should be insane, or deceived into thinking his child dead as well as his

wife, my dear mother! It might be that way, Sam?"

"Yes, it might, but I hardly think you need worry your dear heart over such an improbability, Avis. Still, I promise you that I'll probe the mystery to the very bottom, and if it should prove to be as you seem to fear—"

"To hope, not fear, Sam!"

"Well, dear, either way I'll do my level best to right all wrongs. And now, Avis, one word of sober warning, little woman!"

"You're not going to scold me, Sam?" looking up with a smile through his tears.

"Never that, Avis!" with an earnestness which brought a deeper blush to her fair cheeks and caused her to gently withdraw from that encircling arm. "But warn you I surely must!"

"This Nesbitt is more devil than saint, and if he should fairly suspect you of being what you are; if he was to discover that you are the sole living relative of Martin White, who was the discoverer of the Lucky Strike, he'd prove a mighty bad enemy!"

"Promise me to be guarded in every word or action so long as you remain here at the Slope. Promise that you will avoid Nesbitt as much as you can without actually betraying your suspicions of him."

"If you ask it, Sam, that is sufficient for me."

"I do ask it, Avis, and because of the reasons given. And, dear, I'll have to ask something still harder; for me, if not for you."

"What is that, Sam?" a little more shyly asked the maiden, her cheeks aglow and a half-frightened, half-glad light peeping through her nearly closed and downcast eyes.

"Not just what I'd like to ask, dear; not what I surely shall ask one of these days provided all goes well with us both," came the low, earnest response. "But just this, Avis:

"You must follow up the cue I gave you, this morning, when that villain was eaves-dropping. You must treat me as a stranger, leaving me to arrange our meetings, and to set time and place for exchanging such information as we may be able to pick up."

"Surely you'll not mistake me, Avis? It is more for your dear sake than for my own safety that I ask this of you."

"I understand, Sam, and all shall be as you wish."

"All? Say that once more, Avis; and look into my eyes as you pronounce the words, dear!" earnestly breathed the detective, now something more, something far better than the hunter of mankind.

Avis looked up, blushing divinely, yet bold in her timidity.

"Say it, Avis; say that all shall be as I wish, now and hereafter!" urged the—surely it lacked mighty little of being "lover," now?

"All shall be as you wish, Sam, now and hereafter!" softly but distinctly repeated those red-ripe lips.

"Thank you—and thank Heaven, dear!" earnestly whispered Sheldon, then adding in altered tones: "I can wait now until the right day comes, Avis, and do my dangerous work all the better for the words you have just spoken. And now—you must go back to town, dear."

"With you, Sam?"

"I wish it might be, Avis, but better not. Remember it's a dangerous game we've got to play, now, and against most unscrupulous enemies. I believe Absalom Nesbitt is the worst of those, and we must make him look upon us as strangers to each other. So—good-by, Avis!"

And so they separated, the maiden going in advance, with Sheldon following after at a distance, guarding her so interestedly that he forgot to care for himself—for unseen foemen leaped out from cover and caught him fairly in the toils!

CHAPTER XXI.

THE HIGH-ROLLER DETECTIVE'S CLOSE CALL.

WITHOUT the slightest warning came that foul assault, two men rising up from snug cover amidst those rocks, one of them holding a revolver in readiness, while his mate swung

a looped lasso around his head once before making a dexterous cast.

True to the cowboy's aim, the well-greased and pliant rope shot through the air and fell fairly over head and to the shoulders of the High-roller Detective, before he could even suspect the fact that danger menaced.

With a backward leap and fierce jerk upon the rope, the cowboy drew his noose fast and at the same time brought Sheldon to earth with stunning force.

That shock nearly knocked the detective senseless, and as his head just grazed a jagged rock in falling, his escape from death maybe called marvelous.

The ruffians came with a rush, but one of the twain recoiled with an ugly oath as he saw Silver City Sam struggle to arise and draw a weapon, giving a gasp of recognition at the same time.

"You cur! I'll never—give up—"

Instinctively the fellow recoiled as he saw recognition was complete, and far as Jack Ellison was concerned, the tables might have been most effectually turned then and there.

Silver City Sam saw that evil-looking face, and knew as by instinct that his sole hope lay in fighting for his life, for of mercy from that quarter he could expect none.

With a desperate effort, then, he regained partial use of his hampered arms, reaching for and fairly grasping the butt of a revolver; but ere he could do more, the cowboy gave another savage jerk to his lasso which dragged the High-roller several feet over the stones, and at the same time so benumbed his arms that he lost grip on his weapon.

"Steady, pardner!" the fellow spoke in swift warning. "The blame' broncho'll kick you so full o' holes you cain't hold water ef—Easy, thar, blame j e, Maverick!"

With a vicious snarl and curse, Ellison rallied from his brief-lived dismay, jerking forth a weapon as he leaped upon his hampered enemy, one hand clutching at that exposed throat: and his knees boring heavily into those ribs.

"Now I have got ye!" he cried, venomously, resisting the feeble efforts which were all Silver City Sam could muster under the circumstances. "Dead men tell no tales, and I'll cut your heart out, if— Say your prayers, you infernal bloodhound!"

With that rope cutting painfully into his flesh, with that hand on throat and knees on body, Sheldon had precious scant hope for life just then; but he never flinched or even thought of calling for mercy as he saw that knife-armed hand rise above his person, eager to fall and drain his heart of its last life-drop.

Left to themselves, there could have been but one ending to that dastardly assault, but such was not to be; another surprise was already prepared, and with stern shouts another ambushade was emptied of its living contents.

"Steady, thar, cuss ye, Jack Ellison!" thundered Perry Castle, as he and a couple of mates broke cover, sending a rattling volley in advance of their coming.

More through luck than genuine skill one bullet smote that uplifted arm, shattering the bone and causing the knife to fall innocuous from those unnerved fingers as the crippled assassin started to his feet in momentary panic.

Ellison saw those rushing figures, and heard his own name coming from one pair of lips, telling only too clearly that he could not hope to lie out of the scrape, even should he be able to escape with life.

He saw Sheldon struggling to shake off that noose, the lariat now lying loosely over those stones, abandoned by its owner, who was ducking low down as he swiftly dodged away among the thick-lying bowlders, intent only on preserving his own precious hide.

Then, as the knave felt the grating of bones as his helpless member swung awkwardly at his side, a furious curse burst through his blanching lips and he caught at his second revolver with his left hand, jerking forth the weapon even as he staggered and fell in an awkward heap.

"You devil! I'll never—I'll send you to hades first!" he hoarsely gasped, paying no heed to the stern cries from the rescuing squad, but trying to secure a steady aim upon the High-roller.

A "low-roller," just then!

For Silver City Sam had not time to clear

himself of that lasso, having but imperfect use of either hands or arms as yet, and seeing how viciously resolved Ellison was to count a coup, he writhed quickly aside and tossed his head around, just as that weapon exploded with deadly intent.

Sheldon felt the sting of the lead on one cheek as he rolled over, but he knew it could be nothing worse than a mere skin-graze, and as he forced a second turn, he contrived to cast off that hampering noose.

As the lasso dropped away, the High-roller swung around and to his knees, hands catching pistols and jerking the weapons forth, his voice ringing out in double warning as he swiftly took in the situation:

"Steady, all! I'll bore you, Jacky—don't shoot him again, pards!"

For Perry Castle and his fellows were coming up with a rush, each one trying to be first to cover and "salivate" the rascal whom they heard but could not see peppering the Man from Silver City.

For Ellison had sunk down between two gray rocks, and turned dizzy by the fierce agony of his shattered arm, had fallen over to that side and given the crippled member an awful wrench.

Savage curses came gaspingly from his whitened lips, but he was too sick just then to make further use of his weapons, and recognizing this, Sheldon quickly shielded the assassin from the on-comers.

"Hold hard, all!" his voice rung out in stern warning as he moved closer to the crippled knave. "He's my meat, and—look to his pal!"

But the cowboy had improved his moments most marvelously, being already lost to sight among those rocks, nor could either of the rescuing party glimpse the knave again.

As for Silver City Sam, now that he had time to catch his breath and cast a fair look around, his first thought was for Avis White and her safety.

He had watched her nearly to the edge of town, and hoped that she had kept right on in blissful ignorance of his peril.

He failed to see aught of her now, and that gave him fair grounds for thinking his hopes would prove true.

It did not take long to convince Perry Castle and his brace of comrades that the cowboy had made good his escape for the time being, but knowing that they held a living clew to all in Jack Ellison, they were less reluctant to abandon the chase, just then.

On their return to the scene of that brief struggle, they found Silver City Sam already questioning his captive, whom he had deprived of all weapons, and who was lying back against a rock, holding his crippled arm with his other hand, looking ghastly pale and with face pain-drawn, yet still sullenly defiant.

"Who set you on my back, Jacky? Might as well spit out the truth as tangle your forked tongue all up in a gob of lies, don't you reckon?"

Sheldon showed none the worse for his adventure, save in garments; they had suffered in some respects, but were by no means past mending.

Along one cheek showed a red streak, marking the graze of a bullet, but the skin had not been broken.

"I told you, didn't I?" growlingly returned the discomfited knave.

"Tell it again, and see if you can't get it straighter, Jacky."

"I was trying to even up for a pard, curse you for a devil! You laid him up, just when—and now—look at me, you demon!"

Silver City Sam was looking at him, although he hardly deemed it necessary to say as much.

"Look ye here, Ellison," he said, with more gravity. "I hate to call a cripple a liar, but I can't help saying just this much: tell your boss that he can save good money by tackling this particular job himself, instead of hiring others to turn the trick."

"You're past doing it up brown, and Esau has had to retire to the dry dock for needed repairs. So—let him come to the front, and, as a possible inducement, just say that I agree to pay his funeral expenses out of my own pocket!"

Again came the surly denial that any one

else had aught to do with that affair save himself and a natural desire to "even up" for a misused pard; and having vainly striven to learn name or identity of the escaped knave, Silver City Sam abandoned the effort for the time being.

Those shots had been heard at town, and the alarm was quickly spreading, a number being now visible as they hurried in that direction.

For reasons of his own Sheldon was hardly desirous of posing as a hero for the second time that day, and so determined to beat a retreat while the way was open.

"You look to this fellow, won't you, Castle? Of course I'll see that all costs are covered. Give him decent care, and such treatment as his hurts require. Will you?"

"You bet I will, since you ask it, sir! Only for him, though, I'd heap sooner kick him clean to glory amen!"

"He's paid off pretty thoroughly, I fancy, as it is," with a brief and grim chuckle. "Treat him white, just to astonish him by the contrast. And—I say, Castle."

"Say it, boss!"

"I'll try to thank you all later on for chipping in so opportunely. It was monstrous lucky your happening to be on hand, just now!"

There was a half-bantering echo to those words, and a half-mocking glow in those blue eyes, but if Castle flushed a bit before them both, he certainly had his answer ready.

"'Twas lucky, boss, but it just happened that way. Then, when we saw trouble, 'course we had to jump in with both feet!"

Smiling faintly, the High-roller turned away toward town, thoughts busy enough, and not all of his reflections agreeable ones.

CHAPTER XXII.

MR. NESBITT SUPPOSES A CASE.

MAKING a bit of a curve the more readily to avoid meeting with those who might ask questions which he preferred not having to answer just then, Silver City Sam picked his way back to town, pondering over this latest phase of the intricate case.

He could understand easily enough why that vicious assault had been made, without going deeper than the naked explanation given by the crippled gambler.

But what troubled him a vast deal more, was the lucky appearance of Perry Castle and his fellows upon the scene of action.

True, their coming had almost certainly saved his life, for Jack Ellison surely meant murder as he glared down into the eyes which had recognized him; but—how chanced they to be right there, right then?

How long had they been among the rocks? How much had they seen and heard?

"Give him even half a show, and Perry Castle would pan out about as white a man as one can stumble against in this godless country! But with such a boss to egg him on— Was he hired to play spy on my movements?"

Right there lay the sting, and it bothered the High-roller far more than he cared to admit, too.

Without encountering any particular interruption, Sheldon reached town and his hotel, and while hurrying along to his chamber, where he intended making himself just a bit more presentable, his heart gave a glad leap and a heavy weight seemed lifted off his mind.

There was Avis, safe and unharmed, smiling back at him as she disappeared through a door an instant later.

Placed at his ease on that all-important point, Sheldon banished all other cares, passing a quiet hour in his chamber after freshening up his toilet as far as his rather limited facilities would permit.

He had no particular desire to go abroad again that day, feeling fairly well assured that the story of his latest adventure must have spread throughout the Slope long ere this, and that unwelcome curiosity would meet him at every turn when he was to put in an appearance.

Then, too, he had an abundance of thought-material, and none too much leisure time in which to untangle the various strands and lay them each in its proper place.

Little more than an hour had elapsed since

his return from the hills when Silver City Sam was roused by a gentle tapping at his door, and opening this he found himself face to face with Absalom Nesbitt.

"Beg pardon if I'm interrupting you, Sheldon, but—"

"Don't mention it, sir! Come in, won't you?"

"Thanks. If it's all the same to you, suppose we go across to my office? Or—well, perhaps 'twill do just as well, here."

Quickly changing his mind, the mining magnate crossed that threshold, closing the door gently behind himself.

Placing the one chair his chamber could boast for his visitor, Silver City Sam seated himself upon the edge of his bed, prepared for whatever might come.

He felt reasonably sure Perry Castle had made his report to Nesbitt, and that he owed this visit mainly to that adventure among the rocks lying east of town.

Or—was it to the fact of his meeting with the daughter of Martin White, discoverer and original owner of the Lucky Strike?

Almost the first word spoken by his visitor after being seated convinced Sheldon that his suspicions were well founded, for that remark touched upon his shooting-scape with Jack Ellison.

Shrewdly resolving to forestall his inquisition, and thus keep the advantage in his own hands, Silver City Sam spoke with seeming frankness about the affair, then added:

"If you are actually anxious for me to act as superintendent of the Coupon, Mr. Nesbitt, I reckon you were wise in clinching the bargain just as you did, to-day."

"How so, pray?"

"I told you I had a second string to my bow, didn't I?"

"I believe so, yes. You mean?"

"That the young lady I had in mind just then renewed her offer of an engagement just a little while before Jacky bit off a bigger mouthful than he could easily get away with."

"You mean Miss White, of course?"

Silver City Sam arched his brows a bit in counterfeit surprise, but made answer promptly enough:

"Yes. You are acquainted with her, then?"

"Not so intimately but that I could stand a little more information, so—what do you know about the young woman, Sheldon?"

"That she's a clipper for looks, and a woman of business mighty sight older than her age looks to be," came the prompt response. "Wants to sink a pile of good money in paying property out here, where the per cent. counts up in a holy hurry."

"What and who is she?"

"Miss White. Got spare rocks. Has an odd fancy for mines and the like. Thinks a little fortune can be picked up at 'most any crook or turn, if one is keen to catch a fair chance."

"An old acquaintance of yours, of course?"

"An old—what?"

"You knew the lady before she struck the Slope, of course?"

"Never even dreamed that this world held such a creature," coolly affirmed the High-roller, meeting those keen eyes with all possible innocence and candor.

"Queer—decidedly queer!"

"How so, pray?"

"A complete stranger, you say, yet the lady meets you out in the hills, in broad daylight!"

"Beg your pardon, sir, but you've sort o' got the cart before the horse," declared the High-roller, with a low, amused chuckle, as he leaned back on an elbow supported by that knife-pierced pillow.

"What do you mean by that?" sharply demanded Nesbitt.

"Because I met the lady instead of her meeting me," came the cool answer. "I caught sight of her taking a stroll, just as she might take the air back in God's country, without so much as a thought of trouble or of danger."

"Then it wasn't a regular appointment?"

"Not nearly so lucky as that would seem, my dear sir. To quote the old song, 'we met by chance,' and I thought it only right

to let drop a hint that Gopher Slope wasn't exactly Paradise, if her gates were wide open. And so—well, the young lady renewed her former offer of an engagement if I was still out of a job."

"And you told her—what?"

"Pretty much the same thing I told her this morning in the best room, down-stairs: that I wasn't my own man, now, and that I reckoned she couldn't do better than to tackle you about investing her good money."

All this came so smoothly, and with so much apparent honesty, that such fears and doubts as Absalom Nesbitt may have entertained were banished, for the time being at least.

For something over a minute he sat in silence, plainly debating with himself, while Sheldon waited patiently for his visitor to unbosom, ready to meet almost any sort of attack.

Presently Nesbitt fixed eyes upon the High-roller, speaking slowly:

"You say you are my man, now, Mr. Sheldon. How much does the wages I am to pay you cover?"

"Cover? Oh—pretty much everything, I take it."

"Even if the work offered should look to be a little off the usual lines?"

"Of course. I take your pay, which comes at my own figures. In return I naturally expect to do your work. That work, of course, you are to name, just so you don't demand impossibilities," quietly answered the new superintendent of the Coupon Mine.

"You really mean all this, Sheldon?"

"Yes. Unless the work you wish done should prove to be too much off-color, that is," like one deeming it wise to insert a saving clause.

This last sentence apparently failed to entirely please the mining magnate, and a frown wrinkled his brows as his heavy lids drooped once more in sober thought.

Still, Sheldon had given him latitude enough, and evidently reflection only decided him to press the awkward matter further home.

Lifting head and eyes once more, Nesbitt slowly spoke:

"Suppose I needed a certain obstacle removed from my path, and came to you for assistance, Sheldon?"

"What sort of an obstacle, first?"

"Well, suppose I was to call it—a man?"

The High-roller made a languid gesture, then tersely answered:

"Unless a cripple, or too old, I'd pick a fuss and send him over the Great Divide in a holy hurry!"

"But suppose—merely a supposition, of course; suppose it was a woman, what then?" persisted the mine-owner.

Silver City Sam sat up on the bed, his manner and tone altering, yet neither betraying any very great shock.

"A woman? Well, of course that's a gray horse of another color, and before saying any more, let me ask just what it is you want done?"

"If I was to say I wanted her put out of the way?"

Sheldon shook his head, decidedly, shrugging his shapely shoulders in dumb refusal, yet putting his objections into words as well.

"No, no, Mr. Nesbitt; that's just a weenty bit too far over the line. I don't pretend to be a saint; I reckon I'll have about as much to answer for at the Last Trump as any other poor devil; but I draw the line at killing squaws, and I draw it deep!"

Absalom Nesbitt laughed like one enjoying his little joke; but he added after a few moments thus spent:

"Of course I didn't really mean to kill a woman, man, dear, but—suppose I wished you to frighten one of that sex?"

"Oh, that's different!"

"Would you undertake such a job, then, as my confidential agent?"

"If you asked me to, yes. How, and what for, pray?"

There was another brief pause at this phase of the game, just as though the schemer was hardly decided whether or no it would be the part of wisdom to fully confide in this new recruit.

But after a few moments spent in thought, he added:

"Suppose this Miss White had come to the Slope with the express intention of making trouble over the Coupon Mine, and suppose I should conclude it wisest to—to quiet her, peacefully, yet effectually, how far could I count on your assistance, Mr. Sheldon?"

"Wait a bit, and let's clear away every bump as we roll over the course, boss," was the cool speech. "Now, quiet her, you say?"

"Yes. Put a seal over her lips, you understand?"

"Not the seal of death the poets rant about, surely?"

"Of course not! That would be murder, man!"

"And you mean, not murder, but—what?"

"What's the matter with marriage, Sheldon?"

Silver City Sam stared with widely opened eyes, and Nesbitt gave an oily chuckle as he spoke on:

"Of course I'm only supposing a case, my dear fellow, yet there is quite enough meat in it to give careful attention. So—open ears!"

"Suppose I decide to marry this young lady, and she hasn't sufficient good taste to jump at my first offer."

"Suppose I decide to run her off to a quiet spot where she can think it all over in retirement, and then—if I still have to force an acceptance, will you help me coax the obstinate beauty to say yes?"

Silver City Sam listened without turning a hair, then spoke:

"Yes. When shall we turn the trick, boss?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON A SPOOKISH EXPEDITION.

SILVER CITY SAM spoke in the most matter-of-fact way imaginable, to all outward seeming ready to tackle the job off-hand; but instead of meeting his new superintendent with equal frankness, Absalom Nesbitt broke into a low laugh, just as though he had found something extremely comical in the whole affair.

"Why, Sheldon, you talk just as though you meant it all!"

"Why wouldn't I mean it, then?"

"I was merely testing your fidelity to your new employer, Sheldon. Just hatched up the first idea that came to hand."

"Then you were simply jesting, Mr. Nesbitt?"

"Merely joking, my friend, and I trust you'll not take offense at my nonsense," said the mine-owner, with more earnestness in his tones.

"Then there is no trouble? No fresh trouble over the Coupon, I mean, of course?" asked the superintendent, seemingly perplexed.

"Why should there be, Sheldon? As for this woman—bah! There isn't the ghost of any grounds for her making trouble along that line."

"And there's no question of wedding-ring, sir?"

"Not unless you see fit to offer her one on your own account, my dear fellow!"

"I? Oh, I don't count. And even if I did, I'd rather wait until I was my own man again, without another's collar around my neck. But—may I say it, sir?"

"Why not? You and I surely ought to turn out good friends, Sheldon. What's bothering you, now?"

"Well, sir, was it just to spring this little joke on a fellow that you looked me up this evening?"

"Not exactly, no. You see, Sheldon, it's pretty much like this: Ever since Jonah Cain began to lose his nerve, a couple of weeks or more ago, everything has been going at cross-purposes over at the Coupon."

"We'll soon straighten that out, sir, once I get in fair swing," confidently assured the newly hired superintendent.

"I hope so; I most sincerely hope you will, Sheldon! But—well, to be perfectly frank with you, there is some grounds for the men taking such fright at the old place!"

"You mean about the Death-watch, and the like o' that?"

"Yes. The men will have it that the mine is crammed chuck full of spooks and such abominations, and—well, not to put too

fine a point upon it, Sheldon, I've seen something mighty uncanny right in there my own self!"

"What like, sir?"

"A skeleton of fire, it looked like. Of course I know it was some infernal trick or deception, but—"

"Some bold rascal trying to disgust you with the Coupon, of course. Did you ever stop to think how much virtue there might be in a little prepared saltpeter and lead, Mr. Nesbitt?"

"I wasted a couple of shots on the—on whatever it was, that time, but never made it turn a hair. And I'm no great slouch with a gun, either!"

Silver City Sam remained silent for a space, evidently pondering over the matter, but presently he asked:

"I thought that flaming bones business was confined to the road?"

"I wish it had been! There's a fortune in the Coupon if I was let run it steadily and on purely business principles; but I'm not!"

"Cain lost his nerve over those devilish tricks, and so lost his life in the end. My men have knocked off work, swearing that they can't stand it longer, and the Coupon is idle now."

"We'll mighty soon change all that, sir."

"There's only one sure method, Sheldon, and that is to lay this infernal ghost! If you would agree to try it on with me!"

"Of course I will, sir. What have I agreed to take your wages for, if not to do the work you need done most?"

"But spook-hunting can hardly be classed as work such as a mine superintendent engages for, you know."

"Maybe not, but it seems to promise heap sight more fun; and I've got just the healthiest appetite for amusement you ever did meet up with!" enthusiastically declared the High-roller.

"Then you'll go with me, down in the mine, Sheldon?"

"You bet I will, sir! When shall we start?"

"This evening, after supper will be about the best time. That will suit you?"

"Way up in the nines, sir! Shall we call it settled, then?"

"Yes. Come over to my office after supper; say between eight and nine. I'll have everything in readiness for the expedition. Will you?"

"Bet your existence I just will, sir!" enthusiastically promised Sheldon, after which the mining magnate and owner of the Coupon took his departure.

Silver City Sam played his part to very near perfection while under those keen eyes, but after the door closed behind Absalom Nesbitt and his heavy footfall died away at the foot of the stairs, the detective let his mask drop for a time, face showing how far from pleasant his reflections really were.

"The fat, slippery rascal! Coax Avis into wearing wedding-ring of his? Only a joke, eh? Ah, you greasy scoundrel! If you'd only known how near my grip and your throat were coming together just then!"

"Or—did he suspect? Couldn't I keep my mask on? Did he see how my blood boiled at his infernal— Was that why he shifted ground so clumsily?"

That was a far from agreeable thought for the High-roller, for if his doubts were well founded, it meant danger not only to himself, but to another still more precious in his estimation.

Surely the scoundrel had been in earnest while "supposing" that case? Then why had he taken alarm so suddenly?

"He came up here to pump the bottom facts out of me, that's flat! He set Castle to play spy, and our meeting was reported to him. Now—just how much did Castle see or hear, over yonder among the rocks?"

That was another annoying doubt. If he knew so much, then he would be armed at every point once more, and could tell just how far he might venture with safety.

As it was now, he had to take long chances, and he fancied that he would have to guard against more than ghostly perils in the spookish expedition just arranged for that night.

"All the same I'll take the trip unless he backs out of his own accord. And even then I may conclude it worth while to grope through a mile or two of the Coupon work-

ings. Only—better prepare the little woman for snags ahead!"

Acting on this thought Silver City Sam took pencil and note-book, writing a few hurried lines, using no names which might prove dangerous in case the paper was lost or stolen, yet making the situation fairly clear.

He advised Avis to keep close to the hotel for the present, and say as little to strangers as possible until the way opened up clearer. It might be as well to speak with the landlord occasionally about investing in mining property, but on no account to show curiosity concerning the Coupon, or the Lucky Strike.

At first he meant to speak of his coming expedition in company with Absalom Nesbitt, but concluded not. If aught should happen to him, the truth would come out soon enough, and a premature expression of his suspicions would only cause worry and sleeplessness to the dear girl.

Having learned the number of the room assigned Avis by glancing over the register kept in the office below, Sheldon slipped his note of warning under her door, then went down to eat supper with no visible loss of appetite.

Absalom Nesbitt was in his customary place at table, but no words passed openly between himself and the new superintendent, although a low whisper in passing told Sheldon he would be waited for at the office.

It was not so many minutes later that Silver City Sam left the hotel to join his employer at the rendezvous, where Nesbitt had all essentials cared for in advance.

"I'll play pack-mule if you've got any luggage to tote, sir," easily spoke the High-roller; but Nesbitt shook his head and stepped forth from the office, locking the door securely.

"Nothing here, Sheldon. We'll find everything ready up at the mine. You have your guns, of course?"

"You bet! Loaded for bear, too! Or, if you like it better, for spooks."

Nesbitt turned away as though hardly in the humor for making a jest of that business, and Sheldon quickly fell in with his employer's humor.

Nothing hindered their trip to the outer workings of the Coupon, where they found an armed guard on night duty, although he certainly did not lend the impression of being the bravest of the brave.

"You hain't gwine inside, boss?" he asked, coming out of the engine-house, gripping his Winchester as though afraid some one or something might snatch it away from him.

"Yes. Get the lamps, will you?"

"Ef you say so, boss, only—thar's the devil an' all mixin' things up in thar, an' ef the Coupon hain't ram-jam-chuck-full o' spooks, then I don't want a cent!"

"All right, Johnny," pleasantly spoke up the new superintendent, as material for making darkness visible was produced by the guard. "If we find any more ghosts than we want for ourselves, I'll fetch back a neat little assortment for you to pard in with!"

Absalom Nesbitt led the way into the mine, a lamp fastened to the old hat he had donned for the occasion, Sheldon following close upon his heels wherever the tunnel was rather contracted for two to walk abreast.

Neither adventurer spoke for some length of time, for Nesbitt both looked and acted like one in stern earnest, turning his head from right to left to more thoroughly light up those gloomy places.

But when the two men were fairly down in the bowels of the Coupon, that lamp was suddenly extinguished, leaving them in utter darkness until—a crazy laugh, then a skeleton of fire showed just ahead!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DEATH-WATCH OF GOPHER SLOPE.

ALL this happened with astonishing rapidity.

The lamp went out without warning, no hands touching it, no blow or puff of wind coming to account for its extinguishment.

That wild, weird laugh sounded doubly unearthly there in the very bowels of the earth, fit preparation for that ghostly vision which put in an appearance at the same breath of time.

Tall beyond the height of mortal mankind seemed that ghostly frame-work, each item of which was outlined by a bluish flame, flickering, creeping, writhing, as though truly living fire, yet looking wondrously supernatural the while.

Absalom Nesbitt gave a low, hoarse exclamation at the going out of his light, recoiling a bit, as well he might; but Silver City Sam seemed better prepared for some such vision, and took speedy action.

Beyond all doubt this was the same strange being to whom he owed whole bones, if not his very life, and knowing how heavily the owner of the Coupon had armed himself for that expedition, he took instant advantage of that instinctive recoil.

Clutching right arm as in the act of rising, revolver in hand, Sheldon quickly swung his employer around and to the rear, covering him with his own body as a truly devoted henchman ought.

Yet promptly though he acted, it was not swift enough to prevent a shot, although that bright spout of flame told how effectually he had destroyed any attempt at aim on Nesbitt's part, the lead going widely astray and expending its force on the insensate wall of that chamber.

"Ha! ha! ha!" came a deep-toned, mocking laugh from the direction of that illuminated skeleton. "Fools, miserable fools, think ye to battle successfully with the spirits of air, the ghosts of the damned? Come ye hither to play with fate, Absalom Nesbitt?"

That skeleton seemed to glow more weirdly than ever, while the deep tones rolled and rumbled through those contracted quarters with an awe-inspiring cadence; but taken by surprise though he undoubtedly was, Absalom Nesbitt proved himself a man of nerve, just then.

"Close in on the infernal fraud, man!" he cried, harshly, wresting his arm free from that grip, although he dropped his revolver in so doing. "Down him! Take him! Both together, now, and he's our meat, dead or alive!"

That enveloping gloom stood Silver City Sam in good stead, just then, for it both covered over and excused his remarkable clumsiness.

The rush was made, but it came to an abrupt ending.

Sheldon was terribly in the way, and, as the collision came, he deftly tripped up his employer, sending him headlong to the hard floor, then flung himself squarely on top to make the tumble an effective one.

Nesbitt was literally knocked senseless by that double shock, and realizing this as his left hand found face and neck, Silver City Sam instantly covered that now helpless body with his own person as a shield against further harm, calling out in sharp tones as he did so:

"I've shut his trap, all right, but you—rack out while you can, old fellow, and drop this monkey-business!"

"If ye think—"

"I don't stop to think when I just know!" sternly cut in the High-roller Detective. "You saved my life last night, and now I'm trying to play even for that. Rack out, I tell you, and drop this tomfoolery, or I'll have to rake you in—just have to, I say!"

Curious language to make use of to such a ghostly adversary, truly! Yet it seemed to produce the desired effect, in part at least.

That glowing skeleton was instantly eclipsed, the bluish light vanishing as by the work of magic.

That sepulchral voice no longer made itself heard, and as he lay there upon the yet senseless form of his employer, Silver City Sam fancied he could just catch the sound of receding footsteps.

If a ghost, that spook was rather substantially constructed, unless the High-roller's ears befooled their owner.

Sheldon had a shrewd idea as to the nature of that startling apparition, however, and there was no superstition bothering him now.

Waiting a few moments to become fairly certain the creature had in fact beaten a retreat for the time being, and was not merely lying low in order to catch him wholly off-guard, he felt for and found the hat with lamp attached, and first making sure it had not been utterly disabled, he struck a

match and shielded the flame with curved palms until he could fairly set the wick alight.

Slipping far enough aside to keep his own person in the gloom, Silver City Sam stood on guard with ready guns until he could convince himself no armed enemy was skulking nigh; then he turned his attention toward Absalom Nesbitt, drawing a bit freer breath as he failed to discover any broken bones.

"Better for him if he'd snapped his neck short off, though, I reckon. Still, I hate to send him out of the world like that, or before he'd had another fair chance to make full amends to—Steady, boss!"

For just then Nesbitt showed signs of reviving consciousness, giving a husky gasp and making a feeble attempt to lift himself up from the cold, rough flooring of the mine.

Springing swiftly across to a point where, as nearly as he could make out, that skeleton of fire had exhibited itself, Sheldon made some hurried marks on the wall, then came back to lend further assistance to the battered mine-owner.

"Easy, sir!" he said, soothingly, as he took the shivering shape in his arms to afford a more comfortable support. "Take it easy as you can, for that devil—he's skipped the country, I reckon!"

"What—where is it?" huskily cried Nesbitt, rallying further, sitting up and glaring around by that none too brilliant light.

"Don't worry over that, boss, but—take a drop of stuff, won't you? Lucky I thought to fetch it along, for I don't make a practice of toting the brew, my own self."

While speaking thus, quietly, soothingly, much as one might talk to a frightened child, Sheldon produced a metal flask containing liquor, which was greedily clutched by Nesbitt when he caught a whiff of its flavor.

Apparently this stimulant was precisely what the mine-owner needed to complete his restoration, for he spoke more like himself:

"Did you down the devil, Sheldon? Don't say you let it slip through your fingers, man!"

"Well, sir, I ain't so mighty sure I had anything to say about it!" came the blunt response, followed by a brief laugh as of irritated pride. "I tried my level best, but—well, I do reckon that the same butt-end of an earthquake downed me that run up against you, sir!"

"I thought—I could have sworn he was our meat when I pulled on him!" muttered Nesbitt, his wits still bemused since he remembered nothing of how that shot was foiled by the Man from Silver City.

"And I! Didn't I blaze away until—Glory Moses!"

Like one just struck by a new thought or brilliant fancy, Sheldon caught up that lamp and hurried across to the rocky, uneven wall, sweeping the light up and down, from side to side until he found what he was seeking: marks as though a number of leaden bullets had flattened themselves out against the quartz.

"Look, will you, boss!" he cried excitedly, free hand pointing to the marks he had taken the precaution to make while Nesbitt was rallying from that fall.

"What is it?" asked the mine-owner, coming that way.

"See for yourself, sir! And—that proves one out of two things, anyway!"

"Lead-marks! Did you shoot at that—at him, Sheldon?"

"I surely thought I did, sir!" answered Silver City Sam, with admirably tutored tones. "I could have sworn I was holding straight as a string, but—well, either that was a genuine spook, or I lost my nerve and shooting-eye for once in my life!"

A bit of perfect acting and well calculated to deceive.

All this by no means helped the case of the mine-owner, who had suffered not a little from that heavy fall, and whose nerve was now beginning to shake under these apparent proofs of a more than mortal enemy playing against him.

Sheldon, the more firmly to clinch his growing influence, proposed to prospect further, even though they had to spend the remainder of that night spook-hunting.

"Or, if you're not feeling quite up to so much hoofing it, sir, after such a nasty tumble, I'll go it on my own hook and come back here to make my report if you'd rather wait."

"No, not to-night, Sheldon," huskily answered Nesbitt, leaning rather heavily upon that proffered arm as one unsteady hand brushed drops of cold sweat from his brows. "I've seen enough for this once, although—you don't really think it's a—a ghost, Sheldon?"

Silver City Sam showed no great haste in answering that question, and the yellow glow of that lamp revealed a face with far more indecision in its lines than was usual.

"Well, sir, I'll not go quite that far, although—I did think I was holding straight, and at such short range I'll bet on splitting a bullet on a penknife every time, even in the dark."

"Still, I can't think it is a spirit!"

"Nor I, sir! But if not, how did my lead find a way through it so smoothly? If it wasn't for the marks on the wall right back of where that skeleton showed, I'd lay it up to a suit of armor, and hoot at the bare idea of aught supernatural. As it is—I'd rather wait for another little brush before deciding for certain, Mr. Nesbitt!"

"Not to-night; some other night. We'll go back home, and—I'm all knocked up by that fall, Sheldon!"

So it surely appeared, and Silver City Sam found it necessary to lend both hand and arm before the mine-owner could regain the outer air, where the guard was full of burning curiosity.

He had to give his own explanations, however, for neither Nesbitt nor the High-roller had any to offer; and leaving the extras at the engine-house, the two men made the best of their way back to town.

Silver City Sam assisted his employer to his chamber, and there left him alone, when repeatedly assured that he could be of no further service that night.

Absalom Nesbitt was sorely out of shape, although he had no broken bones or anything to show for that heavy fall worse than sundry bruises which time and arnica would quickly amend.

For a long time after retiring to his own chamber Silver City Sam lay awake, pondering over the recent events, a goodly share of his thoughts being devoted to that Death-watch of Gopher Slope.

Who and what was he in reality? Could there be aught of truth in the sudden fancy taken by Avis White? Was it possible that her father, Martin White, yet clung to life, though in crazed condition?

That seemed too far-fetched to be probable, yet it was within the bounds of possibility, since his corpse had never been found or given burial, at least so far as his best friends could testify.

"Nesbitt swore to it, but I wouldn't believe him on oath!"

Keen witted though he surely was, Sheldon was forced to leave that among other as yet unsolved enigmas for the night, and presently he gave way to weariness and fell into a sound and dreamless slumber.

It was far along in the night when he woke up, rising to a sitting posture with blood thrilling through his veins and eyes widely distended as he listened with painful intentness.

But no further sound came, and he slipped out of bed, opening his door and thrusting head through the crack—ha!

Surely something was going wrong across the way in Nesbitt's room!

Without stopping to dress or count the cost to himself, Sheldon grasped a revolver, then sprung across to that door, flinging shoulder against it with a force which broke the barrier down, showing him the mine-owner lying senseless, branded, with the Black Hand!

CHAPTER XXV.

THE GRIP OF THE BLACK HAND.

THE lamp was turned low but had been left burning, and its light was sufficient to show Silver City Sam Absalom Nesbitt lying upon the bed with limbs contorted and head twisted backward, bearing that grim brand of the Sable Hand.

A swift look around the chamber assured

Sheldon that none other was within those four walls, but the open window near the foot of the bed told how the Death-watch might have escaped so quickly.

As he had done once before, so now the High-roller Detective sprang to the opening, gun in hand, to look forth in hopes of at least glimpsing that audacious wielder of Black Hand and Bloody Knife; but now, as then, naught met his eager gaze which could at all assist in solving that mystery.

That one look was all he had time to give, just then, for the same alarm which had brought him hither had spread fairly through the Carbonate, and he could now hear excited voices and hurrying footfalls.

Turning from window to bed, Silver City Sam put hand over heart to feel that organ pumping blood quite naturally, and to see that Absalom Nesbitt was already beginning to rally from the shock, let that be of what nature it might.

And then, as both steps and voices came more clearly from the corridor itself, Sheldon sprang to the door and blocking the narrow crack left open with his own person, he spoke sharply:

"Don't make a mountain out of a mole-hill, good people!"

"We heard somebody—What's gone wrong, anyway?" demanded the landlord, speaking as one with ample authority. "This isn't your room, sir, and—What's that?"

A husky, hollow groan came from within that chamber, just then, and Silver City Sam swiftly made reply:

"Nothing worse than a nightmare, as Mr. Nesbitt will tell you himself in the morning. Don't crowd too hard, else—"

The High-roller Detective certainly meant well, feeling as he did that Nesbitt would prefer not being made a staring-stock for the outside vulgar before he could collect himself or disguise that ugly brand; but again an interruption came from the person Sheldon was trying to shield.

A groan, a muffled cry, then the far from steady speech:

"I'm sick—so sick! A doctor—for love of heaven fetch a doctor, somebody!"

"That's something worse than a nightmare!" sharply exploded the landlord, pushing nearer that door, as he called forth in louder tones: "Doc—where's Doc Orrison?"

"Coming! I'll be there just as soon as I can—ugh!—cover the lower half o' me!" a spluttering voice made itself heard from further up the corridor.

Silver City Sam still barred the way against the landlord, who attempted to enter that chamber.

"Let the doctor come first," was his verbal opposition. "If he wants or needs help he can ask for it. If not—well, I'd hate like sin to hurt anybody, gentlemen, but there really isn't any spare room in here, and that's flat-footed!"

The new "chief" hardly resembled a hero of history, just then, as he held the fort in extremely undress uniform; but his good right hand gripped butt of revolver, and something in his whole demeanor whispered loudly of "shoot!"

Dr. Orrison quickly put in an appearance and was permitted to enter by Silver City Sam, who firmly blocked the way to all others.

In his hasty entrance at those signals of distress, the man from up-country had ruined the lock most effectually; but by employing a chair and bracing the back of it under the lock he succeeded in barricading the chamber, thus leaving his hands at liberty to lend further assistance should such be required of him.

Turning that dim light higher, Dr. Orrison took charge of the case, being recognized by the now fully sensible mine-owner.

Trained though the physician's nerves naturally were, they almost failed him as he caught a fair view of that face; for there, diagonally impressed, was the brand of the Sable Hand!

It looked as though it had been stamped upon the living flesh by a heated brand, and Nesbitt muttered about fire that burned and stung as though from the nether regions; but after a hasty examination the doctor spoke in a tone of strong relief.

"It's not nearly so bad as it might be, my dear sir! Only skin deep, and will hardly

eave a scar to show you where it was, in a week from now!"

"Then it isn't—not burnt by a regular branding-iron, doctor?" asked Silver City Sam in low tones.

Nesbitt groaned hollowly, shrinking from that professional touch as he huskily mumbled:

"A demon of fire! I saw his eyes—I felt his red-hot hand, and— Oh, what have I done to—be tortured like this?"

"A bit hysterical through sudden waking," explained the physician in a whisper, then answering that question in like tones: "No, merely a trick played by some rascal with a superficial knowledge of drugs and their action. A surface burn, no more! I could show you a dozen like it, each produced by a separate and distinct drug, Mr. Sheldon."

Dr. Orrison seemed rather fond of hearing his own voice, but he was fairly well up in his business, for all, and by bustling around soon had Nesbitt in a more comfortable situation, soothing oils to his branded face, and a heavy anodyne down his throat.

"Of course it isn't necessary to give you a hint, doctor," said Silver City Sam, when the man of medicine had about completed his work for the time being. "You'll be plastered all over with questions by the curious, but—well, if any real explanations must be made, don't you reckon Mr. Nesbitt would prefer making them after his own fashion?"

The physician quickly recognized the point, and without taking offense where none was intended, promised to guard that secret as well as lay in his power.

"I trust there will be no great sensation," he said, in an aside from the ears of the sufferer. "Of course the burn cannot be hidden entirely, but I think my application will prevent any person from recognizing the—what we saw, sir!"

"If it does, you can count on a mighty well-paid half an hour!"

Not at all displeased by this prediction, Dr. Orrison took his departure for the time, promising to look in on his patient again in the morning early, leaving Silver City Sam to take full charge.

For Absalom Nesbitt, showing how seriously his nerves had been shaken by this strange assault, begged the new superintendent to watch by him, for a time at least.

This the High-roller Detective was more than willing to do, for a number of reasons which hardly need further mention; and having secured his clothes from his own chamber, he let the physician depart, then closed and again secured that door.

When quiet was fully restored without, the curious boarders going away after the doctor assured them that nothing serious was the matter—nothing worse than a nervous attack from which his patient would rally all the more readily if left in peace and quietude—Absalom Nesbitt grew a little more like his ordinary self.

Silver City Sam was naturally curious enough, himself, yet he hardly thought it the part of wisdom to press his employer with questions; he was spared that trouble, however, for Nesbitt seemed only too willing to talk with his watcher.

And yet there was precious little he could tell, so far as that assault and branding was concerned.

All he knew was just this: roused from a sound slumber by that vicious assault, he could see nothing, hear nothing, but felt choked and blinded, while his whole face seemed set on fire!

"You saw nothing at all, then?" asked Sheldon, visibly disappointed. "Not a thing which could help identify that audacious rascal?"

"Not a thing," gloomily asserted the mine-owner. "Of course it seemed as though ten thousand things were flashing in front of my eyes, and I fancied I saw something like that infernal skeleton—"

"Are you quite certain you didn't see just that, though?" quickly interrupted the Silver City Sport.

But Absalom Nesbitt was now firm in his belief, and repeated that declaration: he had seen nothing by which he could identify that grim wielder of the Black Hand.

But it quickly became evident that his recently engaged superintendent had wholly

won his confidence, for he waxed far more familiar, speaking of things and matters which, only a few brief hours before, he would never have thought of confiding to another than himself.

Among other things, he let fall a hint that Avis White might have a more or less equitable claim to the Coupon, and that he was beginning to believe the easiest way, if not surest method of silencing her, would be to put that "supposing a case" into actual execution!

"It surely might be worked, with you to back me up, Sheldon. And you would do that, old fellow?"

"Why wouldn't I, faith?" asked the superintendent, playing his part to perfection, although it was steadily growing more difficult and disgusting.

"I knew I could count on you, Sheldon, and be sure you'll not come off any the worse for backing me up like a man! And—it might pan out worse for the girl too!"

"I'm not an old and broken down man yet, by any means. I can love a girl as hard as I ever could; and that's saying a heap, too!"

"You mean a regular wedding-ring, then, sir?" asked Sheldon.

"That would be safest, yes. She's a good-looker, and would do a man proud in society. And—Augh-yaugh!" breaking off with a prolonged yawn as that sleeping potion began to make itself felt. "Reckon I'll shut my eyes to—think just how the—trick can be—Augh-yaugh!"

His thoughts must have taken a somnolent turn, for in the course of a couple of minutes more he was sleeping—and snoring beautifully!

CHAPTER XXVI.

SNARING A FAIR BIRD.

THANKS to the assistance lent by Dr. Orrison, it was not nearly so difficult a task to calm the burning curiosity of the Carbonate habitants the next morning as may be thought.

Neither he nor Silver City Sam let fall an inkling of the truth, and Absalom Nesbitt slept until long after the regular "feeding hour," then taking his breakfast in his chamber, keeping his seared face hidden from the one who waited upon his wants.

And when he rose from bed, dressed and left the hotel, later on, his head and face were wrapped up to cover a neuralgic affection, and instead of taking the rounds of the Slope, he proceeded directly out to the Coupon workings, whither the new superintendent had long since preceded him.

And so it came to pass that the truth of that midnight alarm was kept locked in the bosoms of the select few: the sufferer, the watcher, the ministering physician, and—that mysterious being who had so successfully applied the brand of the Black Hand once more!

All the outsiders knew was that a nervous attack had temporarily upset the mining magnate, but that he was now about as good as ever, and would greatly prefer letting the matter drop quietly to being annoyed by questions, friendly or otherwise.

Oddly enough, Avis White had not been aroused by that nocturnal seance, sleeping sweetly through it all, no doubt because her sleep had been broken—almost entirely lost—for three nights past.

It was unusually late, too, when she arose on this fair morning, and not a little to her disappointment she failed to see aught of Silver City Sam, although his warning note of the evening before had prepared her to expect just such an avoidance.

It is not intended to be thought that Avis was conducting a "love chase" under cover of an attempt to solve the Lucky Strike mystery, and possibly the vanishment of her father, Marvin White; although it is a fact that her maidenly mind turned far more frequently toward Samuel Sheldon since she left Silver City than it ever had before.

Here she was alone, save for this one manly, faithful friend. He was the one being upon whom she could place any dependence. And—well, up to that recent interview out among the rocks lying east of Gopher Slope, Samuel had never permitted so much of the

eloquent truth to enter his tones or glow in his big blue eyes!

That must have accounted for a goodly portion of that change, for love begets love, especially where the ground has been prepared and the seed already well planted!

Acting on the shrewd advice conveyed by that note of the past evening, Avis sought an interview with her host that forenoon, speaking of her intention to invest some little capital in mining property in case a fair opening should offer, ending by asking his friendly—or fatherly—advice as to the advisability of picking up anything in or around the Slope.

This was a wise move, so far as interesting the landlord was concerned, and the flattered caterer fairly spread himself to cover the occasion.

If Avis had really been on investment bent, the number of surely paying claims brought forward by mine host would have thoroughly bewildered her and confused her choice past all clearing; but since that was but a blind to her actual business in the Slope, what matter?

It was well along in the forenoon when a ragged lad came into the Carbonate, and after hanging around for a spell, caught sight of the young lady just as she came out of the parlor to go up-stairs.

Mumbling something which Avis failed to wholly understand, about a gent's giving him the note for her, the youngster delivered a none-too-clean envelope, then fled before the angry wrath of the landlord.

Avis blushed divinely as she saw her name on the envelope, and believed she recognized the hand—one which was rapidly growing more and more precious to her maiden heart, too!

Running up-stairs to her room, she locked the door, then tore off the cover to find a few brief lines written over the name of Sam Sheldon.

"Come out on the stage-road, running north of town. Important business, and afraid to be watched if meet at hotel. Come, as soon as you can manage it without attracting attention. As ever,

"SAMUEL SHELDON."

The thought of another interview so much sooner than she had dared expect, possibly to see that love-light again, fairly fluttered Avis, and she hardly knew how she was arraying herself for that stroll out of town.

She left the hotel as she believed without attracting attention, but the landlord had keener eyes and stronger curiosity than she gave him credit for, and his little eyes watched her until lost to his view for the time being.

Avis experienced no difficulty as to the proper course to follow as laid down by that hurried note, for there was but the one road leading away from Gopher Slope on that side, and along this she walked with a fair affectation of carelessness, much as a woman might take an idle stroll without thought beyond killing an hour or two which would otherwise hang heavily upon her hands.

No thought of danger troubled her, for had not Silver City Sam asked her to make the venture? And was he not even then watching her approach from—where?

There was an unusually bright yet tender glow in those black eyes as Avis scanned yonder rugged heights ahead and to either hand of that rising trail; but look as she might she failed to catch sight of the man whom she was fast learning to love as she never could hope to love another of that sex.

Nothing happened for good or for ill so long as Gopher Slope was in sight, and that was quite long enough to let Avis feel just a trifle annoyed in her pride; surely Sam might have joined her, ere this?

With cheeks beginning to glow with something more than the exercise, Avis pressed along that dusty road, rounding the turn which shut off all view of town from that quarter; and then she was surprised in good earnest!

Two masked men sprung forth from ambush close alongside the road, grasping the maiden with hands which would not be denied, and at the same time flinging a thick muffler over her head and drawing it snugly

around her throat, thus pretty effectually smothering such outcry as she was enabled to make.

Unheeding her frantic efforts to break away, paying no more attention to her nearly stifled cries than they did to the chirping of yonder bird in the bush, the two knaves lifted Avis bodily from the ground and hurried her away, following the road for a short distance, then leaving it at a sharp angle where a favorable break in the rocks afforded a free passage.

They only halted when at a safe distance from the stage-road, and then 'twas merely in order to save both time and trouble by taking a little extra pains now.

That smothering muffler was untwisted to give place to a silken kerchief folded as a bandage for the eyes, and while this was being put in place, one of the abductors spoke in not unpleasant tones:

"No need of shiverin' so turrible, ma'am, fer thar's no great harm intended ye. The boss 'lows you're heap sight safer out o' town then in it, and what Silver City says—"

"Button lip, pard!" warningly muttered his mate.

"That's all right, matey. The boss never said we wasn't to speak his name, an' ef Samuel— Well, then, shet trap goes!"

Frightened, confused though she was by this totally unexpected attack, Avis caught at the hope inspired by that name, and when their progress was resumed, she gave her captors far less trouble than before.

And yet—surely Sam Sheldon would not act after this fashion? Surely he knew that he had but to ask her to come, and she would comply?

Then—why this unceremonious treatment?

Wavering thus between hope and fear, Avis tried to learn the whole truth by questioning her present guardians; but in vain.

"Ef we don't say nothin', ma'am, then we cain't tell no lies," was the crisp response; and from that time on until the next stage of that journey was finished, not another word could Avis extract from those grim lips.

That stage was won in something more than an hour after leaving the stage-road, and releasing their grasp upon her person, the two men drew aside in silence, making no attempt to prevent the maiden from removing her hoodwink.

For a few seconds her eyes were of little use, thanks to their long confinement; but then Avis gave a low cry and shrunk back from a tall, dark-clad figure standing directly in front of her.

She saw that this person wore some sort of covering to hide his face, and before she could take in more, he lifted a gloved hand in a gesture of dismissal, speaking in low, evidently feigned tones:

"You can rack out, lads. I'll see to the rest, myself."

Without a word in response, the two ruffians took their departure, leaving the maiden to the mercy of this masked stranger.

For stranger he surely must be, since Avis failed to recognize him by shape or build; she saw at once that her foolish hopes, born of those seemingly careless words, were wholly without foundation in fact.

This man was considerably taller than Sam Sheldon, and with shoulders of an entirely different cut and shape.

"I really wouldn't be so silly as to try a foot-race, Miss White," coolly spoke up the masked stranger, plainly divining her half-formed purpose. "I'd only have to catch and hold you, while now—oblige me by taking a seat and listening to a word or two which I have to say."

A gloved hand closed upon her nearest arm, and with gentle force seated her upon a convenient boulder; then he spoke on:

"You are afraid of me, Miss White, but—"

"Why should I fear you, sir?" interrupted the maiden, making a desperate and not wholly unsuccessful effort to banish her fears. "You are no ordinary ruffian—"

"I sincerely trust that does not mean you consider me an extraordinary ruffian, Miss White?"

He laughed softly as he spoke, but there was something lying back of those notes which made Avis shiver rather than smile.

A fiercely loud threat could hardly have shaken her nerves worse, yet she still fought against the fears which were slowly gaining ground, and spoke with outward composure at least:

"Neither one nor the other, sir, and for that reason I am more at a loss to divine why I have been treated after this fashion. Surely I have never wronged you, sir, in word, thought or deed?"

"Very far from it, Miss White, but there may be another and still more powerful cause for so acting. If you saw an innocent person running blindly into a terrible danger, would you not feel justified in extending a friendly hand to aid, even without an introduction in form?"

"You mean—I fail to fully understand you, sir," faltered the maiden, her heart throbbing far more rapidly than usual.

"Which is very nearly the same thing as saying that you believe I am lying to gain some as yet unknown ends," coolly declared the man in the mask, lifting a gloved hand to check her coming denial. "Wait, please, and permit me to show my hand a trifle more plainly."

"Your name is Avis White. You are an orphan, although as yet you are ignorant when your father died, or where he was buried."

"My father—what do you know of him, sir?" almost breathlessly cried the maiden, hands clasping and eyes lighting up vividly.

"I know that by rights he ought to have left the Lucky Strike to you, his only living child and heiress," was the quick response. "I know that you are out here hoping to solve the mystery of his death, and I'll aid you to secure your right, on one condition!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FOWLER AND HIS RARE PRIZE.

His earnest words and manner had given Avis a thrill of eager hope, but now she visibly shrunk from the masked man, trembling as she spoke in far from steady accents:

"On condition, sir? I don't understand you!"

"Yet my meaning surely ought to be clear enough, Miss White. But since you wish it put still more plainly, listen."

"I know that your father, Martin White, was discoverer and sole owner of the Lucky Strike, since changed to the Coupon Mine. I know that he never sold or otherwise disposed of his right or title in said property."

"I know how he came by his death, and can bring to the bar of justice his slayer."

"I will do this, and place you in full possession of his legal rights, on one condition: that you first marry me!"

Avis listened to these swiftly uttered sentences with emotions which defy description, but at that amazing proposal in conclusion, her face flushed with indignation and a cry of like tenor burst from her lips.

"For shame, you coward!"

She sprang to her feet and would have broken away in flight only for the swift action taken by this unknown.

He promptly barred the way, laughing with cool insolence the while.

"That goes to show how mighty little you know of what true cowardice consists, Miss White. No man with even the faintest cross in his blood would dare dream of the game I am playing, now, and before you and I part company I'll make you acknowledge as much."

"A desperate game, truly, yet so nearly won that I don't mind fully facing my hand for your inspection. So—your most obedient, Miss Avis White!"

With a swift movement the speaker removed his mask, laying bare the really handsome visage of the Man of Chance, Doc Brierly.

Well known though he was throughout the Gopher Slope region, both face and man were unrecognized by the young wo-

man, although she naturally felt less alarm than she would have done at a face as hideous as this was comely.

Smoothing his neat mustaches with the white right hand, now slipped out of its glove, the gambler spoke on, clearly, coolly, like one who feels he holds the game entirely at his disposal.

"This is hardly the style of introduction I was looking forward to, Miss White, but needs must when—ahem!—drives! And it may be that you'll even thank me for it all in the end."

"Never that, sir! Let me pass, or your punishment shall be heavy as it surely will fall swift!" demanded the maiden, assuming far more courage than she could really feel.

Again that low, musical laugh, accompanied now by a smile which lent yet another grace to that handsome countenance.

"My poor, dear child! If you only knew upon what a miserable, broken reed you were leaning! If you could only guess—why not? 'Twould be a deed of mercy to fairly open those eyes, surely?"

Those last words seemed spoken to himself, and a brief-lived frown darkened the face of the gambler.

Then he rallied, speaking swiftly and to the point:

"I understand your full meaning, Miss White, but you surely are ignorant of the whole truth; you surely forget how Samuel Sheldon sought to lure you from safety into peril, and—"

Avis gave a sharp cry of indignation at this charge, and flung out one hand in a desperate effort to strike that base slanderer aside.

She strove to flee, and when Brierly barred her passage, she cried out in hot indignation:

"You coward! You base liar! You forged that note, and so lured me away from my friends!"

"I knew you'd say something like that, my dear," coolly retorted the Man of Chance, smiling as though he rather relished her epithets. "But the naked truth remains, all the same, and I intend proving to you that Sheldon really sold you to the highest bidder—that he not only agreed to lure you away from the Slope, but that he promised to help force or frighten you into a marriage with—whom do you think?"

"Never! You are basely slandering an honest gentleman, sir!"

"Of course you think so, my dear girl, else you'd never make the assertion; but, all the same, I am right and you are wrong."

"Samuel Sheldon wrote the note that brought you out of town, along the stage-road where he promised to meet you. He really intended to keep that appointment, by the way, but—well, it didn't exactly suit my book for him to turn that particular trick, so I just sat down upon the knave and—Steady, my pretty!"

Again Avis strove to break away, and once again was she foiled by that cool and watchful villain.

Of course she could not—would not—believe aught he might say against Silver City Sam, but—'twas more than hard to sit and hear it all without protest or repudiation!

"Has it gone so far as that, poor child?" cried Brierly, with mock commiseration in both face and voice. "And that cur could not only shut his eyes to the rare prize, but even in cold blood plan how best to cast it into the clutches of your worst enemy!"

"It is false! You are lying against a gentleman who—"

"Who wrote that note at the dictation of Absalom Nesbitt, the man who now holds the Lucky Strike, to which you are sole and legal heiress, and even worse: the villain who murdered your father, Martin White!"

Swiftly, harshly came those sentences, and Avis shrunk and shivered for the moment, only to rally again and put her full faith into words.

"I will never believe that of Samuel Sheldon—never, sir! You are calumniating him for your own base ends, but they shall never be won so far as I am concerned—never!"

"You will believe it, Avis, because I'll

place such proof before you that doubt cannot exist," coolly vowed the gambler. "If nothing less will convince you of his utter worthlessness, you shall hear Sheldon admit his crimes, one and sundry!"

"Never—never!"

A poor defense, yet it was thoroughly in earnest. Even had the case looked ten-fold blacker against him, Avis could never have believed Sam Sheldon guilty as now charged.

On his part, Brierly seemed quite content to let the heaven work as it might, dropping one string the better to play upon another.

"I am saying nothing more than I can and will make good, Miss White, for I have been stocking the cards too long to make any misplay."

"I know that your father, Martin White, never sold his claim in the Lucky Strike, although a forged bill of sale was produced when he—"

"My poor, poor father!" huskily murmured the maiden, bowing head and hiding face in joined palms.

"Isn't it your duty in life to help avenge that poor father, girl?" sternly asked the gambler, bending closer over his rare prize, eyes glowing with powerful emotions.

"I tell you he was most foully wronged! I tell you he was murdered by the man in whose good faith he placed his greatest trust! And that same foul assassin is now thinking to cover the black past by—what?"

"By forcing or deluding the child of Martin White into a marriage which will give him a firmer grip on the Lucky Strike!"

Those sentences fell from his lips like so many blows, but instead of frightening or softening Avis White, they seemed to lend her force for greater resistance; a fact which Doc Brierly was swift to realize, although it stung him to the quick.

He had calculated so much on that argument, and now—was he to have his dearest play foiled by this milk-faced chit?

He lost a portion of his coolness, and with rising irritation came a lack of polish. He more nearly exposed his cards, no longer trying to play the disinterested.

"I can prove all this—and much more, Avis White," he said, rapidly. "I can and will make good your claims to the Coupon, as your father's legal heiress, but I must have my share, and that is—your hand, even if your heart is a little slow in keeping it company!"

"Never, sir! Marry you? I'd rather suffer a thousand deaths!"

"Careful, my dainty little bird of paradise."

"Why should I spare your feelings, when you have not spared mine?" indignantly cried the maiden, now fairly aroused and giving no thought to the increased peril she might thus be inviting. "You are a liar, a base calumniator, a totally unscrupulous villain, all by your own admission!"

"Careful, Avis White, or I may show you that I am even blacker than your sharp tongue is now painting me!"

"I defy you, sir! I demand that you give way—let me pass, sir, or you shall suffer such punishment as your base conduct richly merits!"

"No, no, my beauty!" with a mocking laugh and glittering eyes as his hands went forth to check her movement. "Since you'll not listen to reason, we'll come down to hard-pan, and that is—Steady, pretty fool!"

"Don't forget that we are 'way out here in the hills, alone and where my will is law if not gospel! If I should see fit to use other arguments which lie mighty handy, I can make you beg for what you now affect to scorn!"

With a low cry of mingled fear and indignation, Avis jerked her arms free, striking with all vengeance at that now flushed face, leaving her mark and causing the gambler to stagger back through pure surprise.

This left her a narrow opening for flight, which was instantly utilized, her feet beating a swift tattoo on the dry soil; but, with a savage oath and cry of rage, Doc Brierly

sprung in hot pursuit, running two feet to her one.

Recapture would have been but a question of moments had no interference come, but come it did, and in a most unexpected shape.

From those gray rocks sprung forth the Skeleton Road-agent, all in black and white, leaping upon the gambler and bearing him to earth as though he was nothing more than a child. Then—

A wild, piercing yell burst forth, and the sickening scent of scorching flesh rose upon the mountain air!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SILVER CITY SAM'S MIGHTY OATH.

It was considerably after the noon hour when the new superintendent of the Coupon Mine came back to the Carbonate for dinner, and though his blue eyes roved around in eager search, they failed to win the reward coveted by their owner.

Seeing nothing of Avis at or during dinner, Sheldon with careless demeanor strolled into the "parlor," only to have another disappointment scored up against him.

But when passing out to the combination office and bar, for an after-dinner cigar, the landlord himself broached the subject which was uppermost in the superintendent's head just then.

"Fine young lady, Miss White, sir?"

"She appears to be all that, if not more," genially replied the High-roller, lighting his weed with well feigned carelessness. "Didn't see her at table, just now. Reckon she feeds earlier, eh?"

"Well, sir, she hasn't come back yet although—"

"What?"

"She hasn't come back yet," repeated the landlord, though just a bit startled by that explosive interrogation.

"Where did she go? And when?" asked Sheldon, holding a strong rein on himself as was mightily needed just then.

The landlord stared keenly into that unusually pale face for a bit, then deliberately asked:

"Didn't you send her a note, Mr. Sheldon?"

"No I didn't! What do you mean, anyway? Spit it out, you—Pardon, old man, but with so much deviltry going on just now, it makes me shiver just to think what might come to a lady who—Can't you speak, man?"

"Well, sir, if I didn't calculate that note was from you when the kid tackled the lady, hope may die!"

"What kid? What note? What do you mean, anyway?"

"Why, sir, a boy came in here and—thar he is now, or I'm a liar!"

Following that pointing hand, Sheldon glimpsed a ragged youngster on the street without, and moving with wondrous celerity he captured the boy before that worthy could divine his danger.

Swiftly questioned the High-roller, but with precious little success by way of information on which he could depend.

The boy at first denied having anything whatever to do with the matter, but when the landlord fairly faced him down, he broke into a sniffling whine, saying that a strange boss paid him for delivering the note to the young lady, and that was all he knowed—so help him!

One keen look into those eyes, then Sheldon gave the whining kid a savage thrust out of doors, knowing that even if he knew more, he surely would not tell.

He had already learned sufficient to feel that Avis had been lured from comparative safety into positive peril; but who had turned the trick?

His first thought turned toward Absalom Nesbitt, for surely the mine-owner had the most important reasons for getting Avis White out of the way?

And yet—would he take such a daring step as this, after having showed his hand so plainly to the superintendent?

Hardly knowing what to think, and with his brain all in a whirl, Silver City Sam fell back to force composure, and look the crisis fairly in the face.

Like one in a half-waking dream, he heard the landlord talking on, describing how he felt and what he thought when his prize

boarder took her departure after that fashion, alone and without a guard; not even a gun along to make it more binding!

Then, recalling what had been said about a note which evidently led to the young lady leaving the hotel, Sheldon hurried up-stairs with the worthy host close upon his heels.

The latter began an expostulation as he saw the High-roller turning shoulder toward that closed and locked door; but Sheldon never stopped to listen, dashing his weight against the barrier with such hearty good will that the lock flew clear across the room.

And then, almost the first thing to catch his eyes was a bit of paper lying on the bed just where Avis had let it fall in her thrill of anticipation while preparing to keep that supposed appointment.

A short gasp of angry surprise escaped the detective as he caught up the paper and saw his boldly written name under those lines; a signature so admirably forged that he could hardly have denied its authorship had it been submitted to his eyes without aught attached to assist his memory.

He flashed eyes along those lines, and then a mighty oath came to his relief; for it served to carry off a little of his mad rage.

"What does it say, boss?" ventured the landlord, trying in vain to catch sight of the writing or signature.

"It's devil's work, and I'll never rest until I've paid the dirty whelp off in his own coin!" harshly cried the detective, crushing that forgery into a little ball, then thrusting it into his breast-pocket for safe keeping and future reference.

"Then—she's gone? Whar's she gone, sir?"

"To her death—or even worse!" exploded Sheldon, staggering a bit and lifting hand to eyes which seemed fairly blinded, so intense were his emotions.

"The—good—Lord!"

This gasping ejaculation seemed to rally the High-roller, and with an effort he choked down his grief and left rage uppermost.

"I mean it, too, unless we can find and save her from the merciless devil who has so vilely lured her from home!"

"Who was it, sir? If we only knowed so much—Who was it?"

"I will know, and when I learn—by all the saints in glory! I'll make the foul villain suffer ten million deaths all rolled up in one!"

With almost terrifying violence came this savage oath, and the landlord shrunk away, more than half frightened for his own precious life.

Silver City Sam saw that he was betraying himself in his fierce excitement, and though his soul seemed full of despair, fearing the very worst, he manfully fought back his emotions until he could both speak and act with more judgment than he had as yet been able to muster.

Leaving the chamber after a swift search failed to reveal aught further which could throw light upon the affair, he said nothing more until reaching the office. Then he confronted the landlord, questioning him more deliberately as to the details.

These were readily given, although only one proved to be of any particular value in Sheldon's judgment.

"You say she went north from here?" he asked, to make certain.

"Yes. Looked like she 'lowed to leave town by the stage-road, but of course she wouldn't do that. A man might jump his board-bill, but a lady—an' sech a lady, too!"

Bearing in mind the direction plainly mentioned in that forged note, Sheldon could no longer doubt that Avis had blindly walked into the trap spread so cunningly for her by—whom?

Again there came thought of Absalom Nesbitt, and once again a stern oath was mentally registered: if this outrage really lay at his door, his punishment should be made to fit the crime!

Feeling fairly sure that the landlord was honest as they are generally made, Sheldon put a little more confidence in him, even going so far as to exhibit that forged note, making it clear that he had naught to do with either the writing or the delivery of it.

"It's the dirty scheme of a cowardly devil

who thinks to profit by my acquaintance with Miss White," he explained further, choking back his intense emotions as well as he could, though their heat showed through that thin mask.

"There's a devil's scheme lying back of it all, too! I'll find out who did this; I'll get at the bottom facts, and if Ab—if I can catch the whelp who's played this trick, I'll drink his heart dry!"

Then Sheldon asked the landlord to assist him in rescuing the endangered lady if that lay in the wood, begging him, as being better acquainted with the citizens, to select two or three men who could be thoroughly depended upon to either fight hard or keep a secret close.

"We've got to bring Miss White back in safety, even if it takes close and hard shooting," was his grim addition. "But, all the same, she will naturally hate to have it spread all over town unless— Well, I reckon you're smart enough to catch on, pardner!"

"You bet I do, sir, and I'll rustle up a choice little squad for— Talk it over later on, boss!"

The goodhearted fellow fairly jumped in his generous haste, losing remarkably little time in enlisting a couple of stout citizens for whom he offered to vouch when Silver City Sam came to look them over.

"All right. We'll say nothing further until we're fairly out of town, for— Come on! And don't make fuss enough to attract notice."

Without blare of trumpets or sound of cymbals the bold rescuers struck out from town to the north, following the stage road as being the most likely course along the edges of which to look for clues to that abduction; for this Sheldon had fixed upon as the truth.

He was more puzzled to decide just who was at the bottom of the trick, although his suspicions naturally pointed in the direction of Absalom Nesbitt.

And yet, surely the owner of the Coupon had no real cause for doubting his new superintendent? Surely Sheldon had played his part too perfectly for detection, so far?

And yet—if not Nesbitt, whom could the author be?

Hurrying along at speed until the town was fairly lost sight of, Silver City Sam led his little band, feeling tolerably confident that no attempt to capture Avis would be made so long as there was a chance for discovery by straying eyes over at Gopher Slope.

Once fairly around that bend in the road, however, he called a halt and made his belief clear, bidding his men scatter out so as to cover both edges of the trail the more completely, then to look close for possible signs.

It was reserved for Sheldon himself to make the discovery; plainly imprinted foot-steps which could only have been made by Avis; and close alongside other prints, larger, coarser, deeper.

And there were tokens of a struggle, such as a weak woman might have made against a couple of brutes taking her off-guard!

Choking down his fierce excitement as well as he could, Sheldon bade his men follow after, keeping on the keen alert, looking to either hand for a possible divergence while he himself stuck to the trail, or to its general line should he lose sight of the foot-marks.

But the nature of the soil was very unfavorable for trailing, particularly when none of the quartette was an expert, and ere long the High-roller had lost all traces of those feet.

While they were scattered in search for the lost trail, sounds came to their ears from in advance and a little to one side, where rocks and scrubby bushes lay thickest; and as the squad drew together on guard, a single figure came into fair view, bringing cries of wondering interest from their lips.

"Doc Brierly!" cried the landlord, first to recognize that shape. "And—look at his face, will ye, now!"

"Branded, by the 'tarnal!" fairly exploded another of the party.

For across that so recently handsome face, now showed the terrible mark of the Black Hand!

Brierly was groaning and moaning, staggering and stumbling like a man suddenly gone blind, and while he seemed to realize

that he had at length fallen in with friends, he could or would give no clear explanation of the manner in which he had come by his hurts.

"Devil—Skeleton—Death-watch—curse him—blind!"

This was the broken current of his ravings, and that was all!

CHAPTER XXIX.

SILVER CITY SAM'S FORLORN HOPE.

THE Man of Chance was branded almost exactly as Absalom Nesbitt had been the night before, that searing hand crossing his face diagonally, with fingers spread far enough apart to each make a separate mark, all of which had so soon turned black with that peculiar bordering of dark crimson.

Past all doubting it was the brand of the Death-watch, just such as had marked the corpse of Jonah Cain and his earlier confederates.

With his face swollen until his eyes were nearly forced shut, Doc Brierly certainly looked what he now claimed to be: a blinded man!

That seemed to be the one fact which filled his brain, just then, and little save moans as to his horrible fate, with broken sentences which surely seemed to point toward the Skeleton Rider, could be extracted from his lips by any art Silver City Sam could employ.

Seeing how hopeless was that effort, and how nearly helpless the branded gambler was, Sheldon sent one of his allies to guide Brierly back to town, then pressed ahead in almost hopeless search for the missing maiden.

That faint trail seemed lost beyond redemption, and ere long the little squad was wandering wholly at random through that broken tract of ground, trusting mainly to luck for success.

Fate was against them, however, and the day passed away, the shades of night crept nearer without aught being discovered, and finally even the High-roller Detective was compelled to admit that they were only wasting precious time by persisting along those lines.

"Heaven knows I'd keep it up throughout all eternity if I thought there was even the ghost of a show for success," he said, gloomily, as he came to a halt there in the midst of that wilderness of rocks.

"And mebbe we're jest making fool-jacks out of ourselves, too!" suggested the optimistic landlord. "Mebbe she's done come back to the Carbonate, and'll be wondering why in time we don't have grub!"

There was a bare possibility that such might be the case, but Silver City Sam felt precious scant hopes of beholding the girl he had learned to love far above his own life when he made way back to the hotel.

Even that faint hope was quickly dispelled. Avis White was not at the Carbonate, nor had she been heard of in any manner since leaving Gopher Slope on that ill-starred venture.

Through all the detective had been racking his brain to find an even fairly plausible solution for that vanishment.

At first, and probably with the fairest grounds, his suspicions all turned toward Absalom Nesbitt, who had spoken to him of just such an abduction as this appeared to be.

And yet, why would he take such swift and dangerous steps on his own accord, so shortly after receiving assurance from his new superintendent that he, Sheldon, would turn that same trick at demand?

"Even if he suspected me of playing him false, wouldn't he be scared to make the play, knowing how surely I'd hitch it on to him? And if so, isn't he smart enough to know that I'd be red-hot against him?"

Right there lay the knottiest point, and one which hindered Silver City Sam from wholly believing the mine-owner the guilty man.

Then his thoughts would turn toward Doc Brierly, charging him with forgery and outrage. Yet—that brand?

Until he saw that, and made sure it was genuine, no deception about it, the High-roller Detective had felt more than inclined to believe the Man of Chance was playing a deep and desperate game to gain full control

of the Coupon, by frightening Nesbitt into selling out for a song, or, possibly, meaning to kill him, just as others had perished since those mysterious deeds first began to occur.

But now—how solve this new riddle?

"Unless he lured Avis away from town, knowing her claim on the Coupon, and was foiled by the Death-watch, Skeleton Rider, devil or what not! If so—which way to turn, now?"

It certainly did not render the puzzle any more luminous when neither Nesbitt nor Perry Castle turned up for supper that night, although both were rather noted for being regular and "mighty square feeders."

True, the owner of the Coupon had shown a strong wish to keep as much as possible out of the sight of the public while his brand was so distinct, but—

Taken all in all, the High-roller Detective never had a more bothersome case presented him, and this was all the worse from his having such an intense personal interest in the matter, yet feeling obliged to cover over that anxiety lest an exposure lead to even worse for both Avis White and himself.

For all he said so little, Silver City Sam kept up a steady thinking through all, and by the time supper was fairly over, he had reached a conclusion—if not entirely satisfactory, one which he felt ought to pan out better than sitting down and waiting sluggishly for the wheel of fate to revolve and fetch the right spoke uppermost.

So far there had been no open outcry raised over that vanishment, for reasons which the High-roller Detective held good and sufficient; and having finally settled upon a more definite course of action, he gave the landlord additional warning not to talk too much nor too loudly.

"I reckon I've hit on something pretty nigh the truth," he declared, with an assumption of far greater confidence than he felt really justified in feeling. "I'll know it all by morning, one way or the other."

"If I can help, sir—"

"You can—by doing nothing save keeping your lip close buttoned. If I don't turn up by morning or earlier—well, then I reckon I'll be out of the hunt, and you'd better call a meeting of such citizens as you feel may be trusted, and tell them all you know about it."

Naturally enough such talk but added to the burning curiosity held by mine host, but Silver City Sam evaded his questions, guesses and marvelings, taking his departure from the Carbonate without letting fall even an intimation in what field his next move was to be taken.

Sheldon passed quietly along the street after leaving the hotel, pausing at the little office bearing the name and business of Absalom Nesbitt on its front; but the place was dark, and showed no signs of occupation.

He hardly expected different, and passed on with a grim determination to make the best of a bad case, feeling that at best he was bound on a forlorn hope.

From that vacant office he headed by the most direct route for the Coupon Mine, asking for no companionship, taking with him naught save his own strong arms, clear wits and good weapons.

It was an easy matter for him to slip inside the Coupon workings without being detected and halted by the watch; that worthy was not at all anxious to stir up fresh trouble for himself by showing too great activity during his tour of duty.

Once well inside the Mine, Silver City Sam moved more slowly, feeling his way since he had not lit the lamp with which he had supplied himself, feeling that he might win more through caution than boldness.

For this was the conclusion he had reached after so much thought:

Doc Brierly had attempted to steal Avis White away, probably through hopes of winning the Coupon by pressing her claims as sole heiress to luckless Martin White.

In some as yet unexplained manner he had been foiled and branded with the Black Hand by the Skeleton Rider, and now—if he might only again be greeted with a sight of that fiery framework!

Thus the High-roller detective had tried to

make the puzzle seem clear, although he was far from satisfied with his own method of reasoning. There were entirely too many "ifs and ands" about it; yet he felt that the venture was worth the trouble.

"If nothing else, maybe I can get at the bottom of this spook business," his musings ran while he stole silently along through utter darkness, "and that will prove some slight compensation!"

Only a few brief hours earlier and that same solution had been the height of his professional ambition; now it was merely "something!"

Gifted with a particularly keen sense of direction and location, Silver City Sam found no serious difficulty in picking his course through the darkness, heading for the spot where the Skeleton Death-watch had appeared to himself and Absalom Nesbitt, and where he had a faint hope of again beholding that strange creation.

"If he should show up, something's going to happen! One or the other of us will get foolish, and that right smart!" was his grim prediction, which after events fully confirmed, too!

As he drew nearer to the decided upon point of the Coupon workings, Sheldon moved still slower, keeping both eyes and ears upon the keenest alert, hoping even against hope until—

What was that?

Surely some sound other than the faint yet continual noises which are to be met with in all such workings, had come to his ears? Yet—

With a suddenness peculiarly startling, the shape of a tall skeleton of fire grew visible only a few yards distant from where the High-roller Detective was half-crouching, revolver-butt gripped by right hand.

No noise, no sound, whatever: one instant utter darkness, the next a perfect skeleton with every bone, both large and small, clearly outlined in a faint yet clear bluish fire!

Sheldon's heart gave one mighty leap, then settled down as before, while he spoke out in slow, distinct words:

"Steady, there! I am Sam Sheldon, friend to Avis White, daughter of Martin White who first discovered this mine. She has fallen into a trap which may mean death or worse. I have sworn to rescue her, or lose my life while trying."

The High-roller broke off, as though expecting some sort of answer.

None came, and that ghostly vision made no move, its bones seeming to creep and crawl in flames, yet never changing position in the least.

"Fair warning, you!" in louder, sterner tones. "If you've a hand in this outrage, I'll pay you off or— Last call, I say! Speak, or tumble!"

Still no answer, and then Silver City Sam darted forward to a close, grappling with that fiery skeleton—only to be twisted off his feet, swung aloft, then fairly crushed to earth like a broken reed!

CHAPTER XXX.

KNIVES IN COUNCIL.

DOC BRIERLY was not injured so badly as he tried to make out, but there was no room for doubting his sufferings, so far as that ugly brand went.

He was conducted back to Gopher Slope, but the kind-hearted fellow who acted as guide surely won scant reward for all his trouble, so far as gratified curiosity went.

The gambler seemed beyond giving any explanation of his misfortune other than that conveyed by his broken mutterings, his anathemas against the demon who had caught him so completely off guard.

He was turned over to the care of John Madison, and then the story leaked out, having sundry additions plastered to it, until Brierly himself would never have recognized his own experience in this new sensation.

First, as a matter of course, his injury had to receive attention, but, instead of calling in Dr. Orrison or other regular physician, Brierly acted on his own knowledge, directing John Madison what to procure and how best to apply it to that hideous brand.

As a result, the color gradually faded away; the swelling was quickly reduced, while the steady treatment promised to send the handsome gambler abroad in a few days,

goodlooking as ever, with no permanent scar to bear witness to his thrilling adventure.

Late that same night there was a seance in the private quarters of the Man of Chance, to which only John Madison and Esau Gray were admitted.

The latter was looking far from fit to be afoot, for his arm was in a bad condition, the shattered joint promising trouble unless an amputation was made; something to which its owner had doggedly refused to submit as yet.

Esau was half-reclining upon a cot whither he had been conveyed directly after that ill-starred duel with the High-roller, and which he had never left since that date.

Brierly had his face covered with bandages, but retained the use of his eyes and tongue, and was a vast deal more like his customary self than when found by Silver City Sam and his mates far out among the hills lying north of Gopher Slope.

"And the pesky critter slapped it right onto ye, boss?" asked John Madison, face and voice that of one whose curiosity could hardly be calmed or satiated by a bald statement of facts.

"Didn't my sweet mug speak for itself?" tartly retorted the Man of Chance, his exposed brows wrinkling.

"Holy Ephraim! You might have knocked me down with a feather when I first—and how'd it feel, boss? Didn't it drive ye clean wild?"

"Do you really wish to learn all about it, John, my son?" asked the branded gambler, with tones suspiciously sweet for the occasion.

"Well, sir, isn't it natural—of course I don't mean to crowd ye, though!"

"Because, if nothing less will content your inquiring mind, Johnny, I'll take all the pleasure in life giving you a fair sample; shall I?"

Madison shrunk away with ludicrous haste, spluttering a denial.

"Then bottle up your curiosity, and let's get down to solid old business," curtly retorted the chief spirit of that rogues' triad.

"What comes first, sir?" asked Esau, with a wry grimace as he carefully shifted his position for another less painful. "I'm out of it, so far as active work goes, since—curse this arm!"

"It'll prove worse than a curse to you, Gray, unless you take my advice and have it off in a hurry," gravely warned the gambler.

"I've studied medicine enough to know that you're only risking your life by clinging to that useless—that worse than useless member, Esau!"

"Then I'll lose my life with my arm," surlily vowed the crippled duelist. "Once for all—never!"

"All right. It's you for it, Esau. I merely gave you good advice, but of course I can't make you benefit by it against your will."

Silence reigned for a brief space; then Brierly spoke abruptly:

"It's coming harvest time, boys, and we might as well get ready to close in and reap the fruits of all our labors and plottings!"

"That isn't such bad news, sir, but just how'll we git thar?"

"Easily enough if you only think so, John. What's to hinder, pray?"

"Well, thar's that Silver City devil, for one!"

"Kill him!" viciously cried the cripple, lifting himself on his one sound arm, face flushing and eyes glowing. "You swore you'd pay him out for all this, yet where is he, now? Alive, sound as a dollar, ruffling it all over the Slope like a fighting-cock! While I am—this!"

"Just the same tune poor Jack Ellison is singing, over there where Orrison has him under charge," reminded the Man of Chance, showing no particular emotion while treating of the singular fate which had crippled his two picked allies, after almost the same manner.

"Only he had his arm tuck off, and the medicine-sharp says he'll soon be able to get out in the sunshine," added Madison.

With his sound arm brought into play, Esau hurled a pillow full at that grinning face, after which he sullenly quieted down.

That brief breeze quelled, Brierly went on with his plans.

"I'll attend to Silver City Sam all in good time, lads, and his pay will be none the less bitter through coming a little late. Let that dispose of him, for the present!"

"As for how we can hope to reap our golden harvest, that oughtn't to be so mighty hard for gentlemen of nerve!"

"We'll watch our chance and lay grips on Absalom Nesbitt. Once with him fairly in our power, the rest will come easily enough."

"What're you going to do with him after gripping, boss?"

"Pinch him until he leaks like a riddle full of water!" came the fierce reply. "Squeeze him dry as a sponge, and every drop shall be a golden one!"

"Holy Ephraim!"

"I mean each and every word of it, too!" assured the Man of Chance, with grim decision. "He's a tough old knot to split, but I reckon I know how to make him give down his yellow grist!"

"We can play Injun, eh?"

"Pretty much that way, Johnny, yes! Torture will soon break down even his nerve, and then—well, after getting all out of him we can, I reckon Absalom will go to sleep!"

"The sleep that knows no waking?" asked Esau, smiling faintly.

"You bet!"

"And after he is fairly disposed of in that manner, then what follows?"

"Why, that's plain as the nose on Madison's face, here; and more than that would be scandalous!" declared Brierly, with a low chuckle.

"Well, nose or not, it's a brand I've toted all my life, and I'd rather have it than some others I've heard tell about, anyway!" muttered the burly rascal, yet evidently ready to duck and dodge a more dangerous missile than a case filled with soft feathers.

But Brierly took the retort in good part, evidently wishing to keep on fair terms with this, his one remaining henchman who retained full use of all his muscles.

"That's all right, pardner; men with big noses are a ways generous and brave, even if they are seldom hung for their beauty!"

"Oh, I hain't kicking, boss."

"Good enough! Now, what do you fellows think of the programme as far as I've laid it out?"

"Well, there'll be a he-old row kicked up when Nesbitt disappears, don't you reckon?" suggested Gray.

"So much the better, man, dear!"

"What?"

"So much the better for our side, Esau; can't you see it, then?"

"Well, scarcely!"

"Yet it's gospel truth, all the same, and I'll prove as much even to your satisfaction, croaker!"

"You thought I'd met up with a dreadful stroke of crooked luck when I got this precious brand slap in the face. So it was, in one way: it lost me the girl!"

"And any other way, Doc?"

"Well, would a fellow be at all likely to treat himself after this fashion?" one hand raising to touch those bandages from amidst which his black eyes glowed with a reddish luster. "Hardly!" answering his own question.

"Then all the other branding will be laid to—whom? To the Skeleton Rider, or the Death-watch, of course!"

"Only for this, some shrewd people might guess that there were more than one devil at work in and around Gopher Slope. They might even remember that Doc Brierly once studied chemistry, and—but now? All danger of that has vanished in the catching of this precious brand, don't you see?"

Both Esau and Madison began to catch an inkling of the truth, and their faces showed as much.

"And so, everything that may befall Nesbitt, even to his disappearance or final death, will be laid at the door of this Skeleton Demon, and while he gets the credit, we'll reap all the profit. See?"

"But, who and what is he, Brierly?"

"Ask me an easier one, Esau!" with quickly altering tone and face. "Sometimes I believe that old Martin White has come back to life; that some other corpse was buried in

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stake for his—for most assuredly Nesbitt believes the old fellow is dead and buried!"

"Then you don't believe Sheldon has got to do with it?"

"Not in the way you mean, Gray; I know hasn't! The Skeleton is half a head taller than Silver City Sam, and more heavily built. I know, for I both saw and felt him, broad daylight!"

A brief silence followed this; but Brierly spoke again, like one who wished to lose the council.

"Well, enough for this night, boys! I'm hardly fit to tackle any big job yet, and we've got to keep up appearances, too!"

"In the morning all the Slope shall know that Doc Brierly is flat on his back, in for a crazy spell where none but his very closest friends can have a squint at his branded mug!"

"Meanwhile, you, Madison, must keep a keen eye on the actions of Absalom Nesbitt, and when you see a fair chance for getting in our pretty work without alarming the whole town—"

"What do you call a fair chance, boss?"

"Well, in case he should try once more to get at the bottom facts of his mine being haunted—ha! ha!"

"All right, boss. And if we do get him, and bleed him, and put him out of the way without raising too nasty a smell at our own doors?"

"Then I'll show up a regular bill of sale, and we'll work the Coupon for all she's worth!"

This decision seemed perfectly satisfactory to the two lesser knaves; and, again warning John Madison to be on the keen alert, yet not to compromise either himself or his employer, Doc Brierly dismissed the fellow, then "bunked in" for the night.

True to the scheme he had briefly outlined, the next morning word spread throughout Gopher Slope that Brierly was "in a mighty bad way," thanks to his unlucky meeting with the Death-watch of the Hot Hand!

And other exciting rumors floated around after a promiscuous fashion, affording ample food for gossip and conjecture.

A young lady had vanished, most mysteriously; and, later on, Silver City Sam had disappeared—no one seeming to know just why or just how!

Some ventured to couple those two vanishments together, but they were speedily frowned down by the landlord and his friends, among whom might be named Absalom Nesbitt!

Then, shortly after dark came once more, John Madison hastened with word to the supposed invalid, Doc Brierly:

"Now's the time, boss! Nesbitt and Castle has just gone to the Coupon!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DEATH-KNELL IS SOUNDED.

This information hardly came as a surprise to Brierly, for his spy had been playing in good form ever since put on duty, and throughout that day word had come at intervals of how "hot" Nesbitt was to "play even" with the Death-watch for the brand so adroitly applied.

As the Man of Chance shrewdly surmised, not even the shadow of suspicion slanted in his direction, now, since he had likewise fallen victim to that searing touch.

All Gopher Slope knew that the luckless gambler was lying dangerous ill from the combined effects of that brand and the terrible struggle he had made against the dread being who had so completely taken him off-guard.

Dr. Orrison could testify to the genuineness of that brand; past all reasonable doubt the same hand had left its horrid imprint upon the two prominent citizens!

Yet Doc Brierly was waiting in readiness to take the field on what he fondly hoped would prove to be the last campaign of the battle for the Coupon Mine, and received that word from John Madison with a chuckle as he rose to his feet.

"You are dead sure there's no mistake, John?"

"None that I can see, boss. 'Course it mayn't be a sure-shot, fer it's mighty hard telling what any man will do, now'days, let alone sech a couple of them! But—"

"Oh, curse your long-winded perhapses! How do you know they've gone on to the Coupon, then?"

"I heard the old man tell Perry Castle so; that's why," came the surly assertion. "If you don't keer to b'lieve it, why—"

"That's enough, pardner, and you want to quit growling. Come! If they're bound for another whack at the ghosts of the Coupon, reckon we'd better be where we can cheer the top o' the heap. So—pray for us, Esau!"

In these high good spirits, never taking thought of what might be lying before, the Man of Chance left his chamber, slipping out in such rude disguise that his most intimate friend certainly would never have recognized him so long as voice was silent and face hidden from a fair view.

As the two men came in sight of the mine-owner's office, a dim light showed through a window, but keeping out in the street, Doc Brierly soon saw enough to convince himself that something beyond the ordinary was on the docket for that night.

Absalom Nesbitt was there, and Perry Castle was his only companion. Both were roughly clad, and each was inspecting weapons as though an occasion for using them was rather more than likely.

"Keep a button on, boy!" mumbled the gambler, in warning, as he moved further away from the office and nearer to the vacant building, [of which mention has previously been made. "Something's up, for a fact!"

"Didn't I tell ye so?"

"Yes, but, wait until we see 'em fairly inside the Coupon; then—well, if we don't win the game once for all, I'll chew the rag!"

Scant time was granted them for time or surmises, however, for a couple of minutes later that light was extinguished and the mine-owner came quietly out beneath the stars, with big Perry Castle keeping close to his elbow.

Stealing along with all the caution of Indians scenting scalps, Doc Brierly and his henchman followed after, pleased to find their game heading for the Coupon, yet beginning to grumble at seeing how close Castle stuck to his boss.

"Devil toast him! why don't he switch off and let the old man play a lone hand?" growled the gambler. "He's just so much dead timber, and if he sticks it out, will be mighty apt to cost heap sight more than he's worth to us!"

"Shall I go tell him so, boss?" chucklingly asked Madison.

No response came to this effort at a joke, and when there was no further doubt as to the purpose of the two men in the lead, Brierly seemed ready enough to accept the situation as it was.

"They've gone inside! Now, Mad, if you back me up as you'd ought, we'll have a holy picnic for once in our lives!"

"You can count on me, boss, 'till the last dog's hung!"

They crouched low in hiding during the brief arrangements made by Nesbitt at the engine-house for an exploration of the works, and breathed just a trifle easier when they found that the armed guard was not invited to form a third in that expedition.

"It's man to to man, now, and I reckon we can come out jay-bird!" the gambler muttered to his satellite as they watched their human game pass into the Coupon.

They waited until they saw the night-watch return to his snug quarters inside the building; then the shadows stole silently and cautiously past, to follow the example set them by Nesbitt and Castle, save that they had no lamp lit, although both were provided with such.

The Coupon was so situated that the main entrance or adit began on a level, drifting straight into the side of Hoodoo Hill, thus rendering windlass or hoisting apparatus unnecessary, so long as that course was selected instead of one of the air-shafts, or upper tunnels.

After a little rapid creeping and groping, Doc Brierly caught sight of a dim light at some distance ahead, and with a muttered caution to his running mate he quickened his steps.

Drawing closer, he contented himself with studying the situation for a time, knowing that any rash step might bring failure, if not something worse.

He saw that Nesbitt alone carried a light-

ed lamp, while Perry Castle crept crouchingly along, several yards in his rear; and without his perfect knowledge of the two men and their relations to each other, the gambler might easily have set the big fellow down as an enemy rather than an ally.

"Just watch them, will ye, Johnny!" he muttered, half in disgust, half in admiration. "If Nesbitt isn't acting as bait for the big spook, while Castle plays reserve, then I don't want a holy cent!"

"Heap ruther him then me, anyhow!" snuffled Madison, as though that air gave him a chronic cold in the head. "Ef the red-hot critter makes a genuine gulp for that bait, old Ab's a gone sucker—sure!"

"If he'd only take Castle as a sweeter morsel, I'd like it mighty sight better!" mumbled the Man of Chance, watching ahead with an interest which increased rather than grew duller.

For some little time nothing happened to break that monotony, as the schemers slowly picked their way through the workings; but, when Nesbitt drew near the spot where he and Silver City Sam had been confronted by that grim vision, almost the same thing happened!

Without previous note or warning, a crazy laugh rolled through that irregular passage, sounding wild and weird indeed; and, flashing forth against the gloom with bewildering rapidity, came that skeleton of creeping flames!

It was just beyond the limited circle of light cast by the miner's-lamp which Absalom Nesbitt carried, but the mine-owner stopped short, making no attempt to lessen that distance.

Neither did he retreat, or even recoil from that ghostly apparition, awe-inspiring though it surely was.

"Look at that, will ye, boss!" cried John Madison, in a hoarse whisper, pointing ahead from out the dark niche into which they crowded for the moment.

"I see; button lip, you fhool!"

Both men saw Perry Castle suddenly drop low down against that uneven floor, each hand armed with a revolver, the muzzles of which pointed toward the Skeleton Death-watch!

If that ghostly creature saw or suspected aught of this, it certainly made no betrayal, for it held its ground, merely lifting one bony arm and fleshless hand to point its grim meaning more clearly, while its deep, hollow toned voice broke that silence:

"The hour of thy doom hath surely drawn nigh to hand, Absalom Nesbitt! Full warning was given thee, and ample opportunity afforded for making what amends still lay in thy power. But what avail?"

"Instead of making restitution, thou hast added crime to crime, piled sin upon sin, scheming against the innocent until—Prepare for thy doom, Absalom Nesbitt!"

"Who are you that dares speak so harshly in judgment?" boldly demanded the mine-owner, moving almost imperceptibly forward, and a little to one side.

Past all doubting his intention was to bring the Skeleton Death-watch inside his circle of light where a surer shot would be given the man crouching a little to the rear.

"Who am I?" asked the Unknown, in deep tones. "The hand of fate! And now for the last time I give thee fair warning, Absalom Nesbitt. Mend thy ways, make full reparation unto the wronged, restore the property thou wrongfully holdest or—thy death-knell shall surely ring!"

By this time Nesbitt felt convinced that no more favorable opportunity would be afforded, since that framework of fire seemed to recede as he crept forward, keeping without his line of light.

He made a gesture which was undoubtedly understood by his backer, then cast the lamp forward, so as to strike near that strange shape, at the same instant snatching forth his revolvers and opening fire as he sprang aside and stooped lower.

Swift to act as was his employer, Perry Castle likewise opened upon the Skeleton Rider with his brace of guns, sending a double stream of fire and lead in that direction, resolved to kill if aught of life was really masked by that death's figure.

The passage seemed fairly filled with sulphurous flames, while fire-arms exploded from every direction, blending with yet un-

Truly, the death-knell was sounding!

THE DEATH-WATCH IS ENDED.

An instant later a hoarse voice made itself heard, together with an ominous click-click

That exception was when the Skeleton Road-agent rescued Avis White from the gambler, then branded him with the same

THE END.

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